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# PROTECTING GRAPE CREEK

**T**rout in freestone streams are tough, battle-tested, and resilient creatures. The Arkansas River has been presented with many natural and man-made hurdles over the past 100 years, and always seems to come back stronger time after time. Adding protections for wild places should still be our number-one concern, and luckily over the last three decades, things seem to be moving in the right direction. The designation of Browns Canyon—north of Salida—as a national monument in 2015 was a key win for the Arkansas River. The 21,000-plus acres of federal- and state-managed lands are nothing short of magical, and the river here has some of the highest trout densities per mile in the entire Arkansas drainage.

According to the local nonprofit organization Friends of Browns Canyon: “Hunting, fishing, rafting, horseback riding, hiking, and camping traditions play important roles in Browns Canyon, and President Obama’s national monument proclamation protects all these traditions, ensuring their preservation, along with the natural character of this national treasure.”

While some key protections have been added with the designation of Browns Canyon National Monument, the Arkansas still faces many threats. Hard rock mining has a long and often ugly history in Rocky Mountain watersheds, and currently, we’re faced with another potential hurdle on one of the Arkansas River’s major tributaries.

Grape Creek flows from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the DeWeese Reservoir, just north of Westcliffe, Colorado. Leaving the reservoir, the creek flows generally north through a remote, rugged, semiarid canyon landscape, eventually emptying into the Arkansas River just west of Cañon City. This is a paradise for small-water fly fishers.

Along Grape Creek’s path are an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, as well as two Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs). WSAs are federal lands without permanent improvements or human habitations, managed to preserve their natural conditions. They are eligible to one day become designated wilderness areas.

However, a foreign mining exploration company, Zephyr Minerals, Ltd., has already drilled unsuccessfully for gold inside one of Grape Creek’s Wilderness Study Areas. Zephyr Minerals built drilling platforms on the steep slopes above the creek, hauling materials with low-flying helicopters, and pumped water uphill out of Grape Creek for use with the drilling equipment. All this was done with strong opposition from local residents and conservation groups. Zephyr Minerals, Ltd. now plans to apply for future mining operations, either in the Grape Creek drainage or on adjacent public lands.

Current national legislative efforts are underway to upgrade these WSAs and designate them as federally protected wilderness areas. But wilderness designation would become improbable if a commercial gold (hard rock) mine, complete with processing plant, waste rock storage areas, and a tailings storage area were to be established within or adjacent to the WSA.

As the largest tributary to the Arkansas River between Salida and Pueblo Reservoir, the Grape Creek drainage is valuable fish and wildlife habitat. The upper and lower Grape Creek WSAs and adjacent public lands comprise nearly 30,000 acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat. As the only water source for many miles in any direction, the creek itself is a precious magnet for a wide variety of plants and animals. Brown and rainbow trout thrive in Grape Creek. In the creek’s thin riparian zone, mule deer, black bears, coyotes, mountain lions, and elk can be found. A large herd of bighorn sheep lives in the crags and cliffs above the creek, and the sheep descend to the water daily.

Along the creek are abundant plants and trees unique to southern Colorado, including several varieties of cactus, narrowleaf cottonwoods, as well as the piñon/juniper woodlands on the slopes above the creek. This rugged tributary oasis is threatened. Longtime Royal Gorge Anglers guide and backcountry specialist Paul Vertrees says: “This lower-elevation wilderness holds significant value for outdoor recreation, including fishing, hunting, hiking, and many other quiet use activities. Mining leaves permanent scars that never heal in this



mountainous, semiarid landscape and on the creek itself . . . not to mention the eventual potential impact on the Arkansas River from its tributary confluence downstream.”

Gold mining is one of the most destructive industries in the world—it can contaminate water, hurt workers, destroy pristine environments, and produce chemical contamination. Producing gold for one 18-karat, 0.333-ounce wedding ring alone generates 20 tons of waste (USGS, 2020). Many concerned parties have dedicated countless hours and resources to bring awareness to Zephyr Minerals operations in this area, but none have done more to champion this cause than the local nonprofit Royal Gorge Preservation Project (RGPP). RGPP’s mission is to “protect and to educate the public regarding the value of tourism in the Royal Gorge area as a viable public goal and to preserve the natural beauty of the Royal Gorge region from environmentally destructive human activity.”

The team at RGPP has done a phenomenal job of educating the public about the Zephyr Minerals exploration activities and the consequential threats to wild fish and clean water in the Grape Creek drainage. Thankfully, with great work comes strong support from great companies in the fly-fishing industry. This year, in collaboration with Royal Gorge Anglers and as a part of their Wholesale Environmental Grants Program, Patagonia contributed \$20,000 to the fight against Zephyr Minerals by funding grassroots awareness efforts via the Royal Gorge Preservation Project.

“Patagonia is in business to save our home planet, and our Wholesale Environmental Grants Program is one of the ways we support our mission,” said Patagonia Fly Fish Regional Steward David Allen. Over the past 10 years, Patagonia has granted \$4.5 million to environmental nonprofits via the company’s Wholesale Environmental Grants Program. Just over \$1 million of that total has funded wild fish projects.

Allen went on to describe Patagonia’s mission within this program. “The intent of the program is to actively enlist the help of our specialty fly shop partners to protect the wild places they call home water. We stand for the waters we stand in.”



Grape Creek is the largest tributary to the Arkansas between Salida and Pueblo Reservoir. It runs through two different Wilderness Study Areas, and could find further protections from hardrock mining if those WSAs become elevated to federally designated wilderness areas.