



**American Rivers**  
*Rivers Connect Us®*

# 2013

**AMERICA'S MOST**  
**endangered**  
**RIVERS®**



# America's Most Endangered Rivers® 2013

The *America's Most Endangered Rivers*® report is one of the best-known and longest-lived annual reports in the environmental movement. Each year since 1986, grassroots river conservationists have teamed up with American Rivers to use the report to save their local rivers, consistently scoring policy successes that benefit these rivers and the communities through which they flow.

American Rivers reviews nominations for the *America's Most Endangered Rivers*® report from river groups and concerned citizens across the country. Rivers are selected based upon the following criteria:

- A major decision (that the public can help influence) in the coming year on the proposed action
- The significance of the river to human and natural communities
- The magnitude of the threat to the river and associated communities, especially in light of a changing climate

The report highlights ten rivers whose fate will be decided in the coming year, and encourages decision-makers to do the right thing for the rivers and the communities they support.

The report is not a list of the nation's "worst" or most polluted rivers, but rather it highlights rivers confronted by critical decisions that will determine their future.

The report presents alternatives to proposals that would damage rivers, identifies those who make the crucial decisions, and points out opportunities for the public to take action on behalf of each listed river.

## About American Rivers

American Rivers is the leading organization working to protect and restore the nation's rivers and streams. Rivers connect us to each other, nature, and future generations. Since 1973, American Rivers has fought to preserve these connections, helping protect and restore more than 150,000 miles of rivers through advocacy efforts, on-the-ground projects, and the annual release of *America's Most Endangered Rivers*®.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., American Rivers has offices across the country and more than 100,000 supporters, members, and volunteers nationwide. Visit [www.AmericanRivers.org](http://www.AmericanRivers.org), [www.facebook.com/americanrivers](https://www.facebook.com/americanrivers), and [www.twitter.com/americanrivers](https://www.twitter.com/americanrivers).

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Photo: Loren Granstaff, Friends of the San Saba

# San Saba River

# #3

Texas

Threat: Outdated water management

At Risk: River flow for ranchers, citizens, and lakes

## Summary

The San Saba River is a scenic waterway located on the northern boundary of the Edwards Plateau in Texas. Flows of sparkling, clear water course through limestone bluffs and hills, supporting fish, wildlife, and recreation. Through wasteful water use and unregulated pumping, irrigators are transforming a vibrant, pristine river into a dried-up riverbed. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality must enforce the law to ensure adequate flows are maintained. Further, the Texas Legislature should appoint a watermaster on the upper stretch of the San Saba River to better manage flows and protect the river long-term.

## The River

The Hill Country and its rivers are often regarded as the most scenic landscape in Texas. The San Saba River, a tributary of the Colorado River (of Texas), is regarded by many as the most pristine of these rivers. The river serves municipalities, waters livestock and crops, provides recreation for citizens, and supplies water to the Austin chain of lakes that ultimately flow to the Gulf of Mexico. Huge burr oak and pecan trees line the banks of the San Saba. The river is home to rare mussels that scientists believe exist nowhere else on earth, numerous types of amphibians, and many species of fish, including Guadalupe bass found only in the Hill Country rivers.

A river steeped in history, the Spanish established the first mission north of San Antonio on the banks of the San Saba in 1764, only to see it destroyed two years later by fierce Comanche warriors. Later, Jim Bowie searched for his fabled mine, and eventually the Texas Rangers established a camp on the San Saba from which they guarded the Pegleg stagecoach crossing.



Photo: Robb Kendrick/National Geographic Stock

## The Threat

Texas law provides that all natural surface water found in rivers is owned by the state and is held in trust for its citizens. There are no sealed meters and no accurate methods for the state to know whether irrigators around Menard, Texas, are exceeding their allowed limits. The irrigators have been diverting the river's flow into a gravel-bottomed canal (where 30 percent or more is lost due to leakage). Moreover, some irrigators place extremely shallow wells next to the river to pull water from the river under the guise of groundwater wells. This unregulated pumping in the last twelve years has almost dried up over 50 miles of the river for an average of five months of the



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Photo: Loren Granstaff, Friends of the San Saba

year. This hurts downstream ranchers who need water, damages the river ecosystem, and negatively impacts the Austin chain of lakes.

While pumping is certainly legal by permitted landowners, such permit holders are required to leave a flow in the river sufficient to service the domestic and livestock users downstream. In 2011, after priority calls were made by ranchers, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) did the right thing and suspended pumping. The river filled up and flowed again despite irrigators' claims that it was drought– not excessive pumping– that had dried up the river. When irrigators pumped the river dry again in 2012, the TCEQ inexplicably denied the priority calls from downstream

ranchers, refusing to enforce the law because they claimed they did not feel the suspension would result in restored river flows. This position was puzzling since the flow returned to the river after the suspension in 2011– the year of the worst drought in more than 60 years.

### What Must Be Done

Enhanced enforcement of the existing law is needed to ensure the river continues to flow. Ultimately, the appointment of a watermaster on the upper stretch of the San Saba River is necessary to monitor stream flows and water use, enhance Highland Lake levels, and prevent the wasting of water and its use in quantities beyond a user's right. In the past, Texas has successfully implemented such a system on other rivers whereby the watermaster regulates the pumping so that the river maintains a stable flow. The legislature should appoint a watermaster for the river's upper stretch to maintain the health of the river for its many users, the Highland Lakes, and the coastal Bays.

The TCEQ is the state agency responsible for protecting the state's rivers. However, with no meters to regulate how much water is actually being pumped, and given the State's ineffective and underfunded enforcement program, the San Saba River has no protection. Based on TCEQ records obtained through the Public Information Act, there has been illegal pumping and management irregularities in this basin. The agency must act to enforce the law and stop waste and abuse. To do this, TCEQ should require sealed meters to monitor pumping activity, eliminate shallow water wells, and suspend pumping when flow is threatened.

### For More Information:

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Photo: Loren Granstaff, Friends of the San Saba

### How You Can Help

- Go to [www.americanrivers.org/SanSabaRiver](http://www.americanrivers.org/SanSabaRiver) and TAKE ACTION!
- Retweet from @americanrivers on Twitter and use the hashtags #MER2013
- Share San Saba River posts on our Facebook page and share our posts on yours
- Keep talking about the San Saba River to decision-makers and with your friends!

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