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Protecting U.S. temporary waterways

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► **To cite this version:**

J.C. Marshall, V. Acuna, D.C. Allen, N. Bonada, A.J. Boulton, et al.. Protecting U.S. temporary waterways. *Science*, 2018, 361 (6405), pp.856-857. 10.1126/science.aav0839 . hal-02607912

HAL Id: hal-02607912

<https://hal.inrae.fr/hal-02607912>

Submitted on 16 Aug 2024

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Marshall, Jonathan, Acuna, Vicenc, Allen, Daniel, Bonada, Nuria, Boulton, Andrew, Carlson, Stephanie, Dahm, Clifford, Datry, Thibault, Leigh, Catherine, Negus, Peter, Richardson, John, Sabater, Sergi, Stevenson, R. Jan, Steward, Alisha, Stubbington, Rachel, Tockner, Klement, & Vander Vorste, Ross
(2018)
Protecting U.S. temporary waterways (Letter).
Science, 361(6405), pp. 856-857.

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<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aav0839>

Protecting U.S. temporary waterways

Protecting the ecological health of rivers relies on maintaining intact flows from source areas to downstream navigable waters (1). Yet the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) intends to rescind legal protection of tributary rivers, streams, and wetlands that do not have year-round flows (temporary waterways) and whose surface waters contribute flow to permanent navigable waters (2). This decision would severely damage the condition and uses of many U.S. waters, both temporary and navigable.

Temporary waterways provide many ecosystem services, including water provision and purification, that contribute substantially to securing water quantity and quality (3–5). Fifty-eight percent of all waterways that provide drinking water to the continental United States are temporary or headwater streams, which support more than one-third of the United States's population (6). Furthermore, temporary waterways harbor important biodiversity (5) and imperiled species (7) and underpin global carbon and nutrient cycles (8). Even when dry, they provide ecosystem services such as providing groundwater, attenuating toxicants, buffering floods, and providing habitat for unique biodiversity (5, 9).

A comprehensive scientific review (10) of all the services provided by temporary waterways led to the decision in 2015 to recodify the definition of “waters of the United States” to include temporary waters hydrologically connected to navigable waters. This provided protection to many temporary waterways under the U.S. Clean Water Act and was hailed as a wise, well-informed decision (4). However, the recodification has not yet been implemented because the legal process is incomplete, and now reversal of the decision is expected (2).

We urge the EPA to uphold its 2015 decision and to ratify the legal status and protection of temporary waterways. This would provide U.S. temporary waterways with a level of protection similar to that in other countries, such as Australia (5). Failure to do so sets a poor global precedent and, more importantly, risks costly (11) and potentially irreversible harm to the ecosystem services supported by temporary waterways in the United States, including the provision of secure potable water.

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12. To view or to add to a list of signatories in support of this letter see: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AS5ew4S3CI3C-5TECAmNgi4cu8O48BY4Wl1AqqlKpog/edit?usp=sharing>.