

# Paint Creek

## Nature. Interrupted

A watershed is the region that is drained by a river or stream. The Paint Creek watershed covers approximately 38 square miles throughout Paint, Scalp Level, and Windber Boroughs; and Adams, Ogle, Paint, and Richland Townships. Paint Creek, which is a smaller watershed within the Stonycreek River watershed, has three major streams flowing into it: Babcock Creek, Little Paint Creek, and Seese Run. These once clean and beautiful streams are polluted from past mining operations and human disregard. Now, conservationists interested in restoring the Paint Creek watershed to its natural state are taking action to improve water quality and to inform and engage residents within the watershed.

### Untouched Beauty

Before the 1900s, the Paint Creek watershed was so majestic with its expansive forests and cascading waterfalls that it inspired the heart of a Pittsburgh artist named George Hetzel. Hetzel, along with other painters, became the *Scalp Level Artists* who preserved the local landscape forever in their works of art. Many nature enthusiasts came to photograph the area and others used the untouched beauty of the landscape for literary inspiration. Although it seems fitting that Paint Creek was named for the artists who painted there, this is not the case. Paint Creek is speculated to be named for the colors of the minerals present in the layers of soil in the area.

### Booming Economy

In 1897, the Berwind-White Coal Mining Company set up mining operations in the Paint Creek watershed and created the town of



Photo: Thomas Clark

Windber. Interestingly, the name Windber was derived by rearranging the first and last syllables of the name Berwind. While Berwind-White opened dozens of mines across the watershed, Babcock Lumber Company began logging operations in the forested headwaters of Paint Creek, which is now part of the Gallitzin State Forest. In addition to mining and logging, the Scalp Level Railroad was built to transport these new products. By the introduction of mining, logging, and the railroad, the economy in the Paint Creek watershed boomed, but as the old adage says, “what goes up must also come down.” By the early 1960’s, all of the Berwind-White coal mines had closed, leaving the area economically and environmentally devastated. Nearly 8,000 people moved out of the Windber area in search of new jobs. The environmental ramifications of mining are still seen today in the area’s orange streams, which are degraded by a form of water pollution known as abandoned mine drainage, or AMD.

### Pollution Problem

Abandoned mine drainage is the largest pollutant in the Paint Creek watershed. It is formed when groundwater fills an empty mine void and chemically reacts with pyrite, or “fools gold,” to form iron oxide, sulfate, and acid. Iron oxide accounts for

the orange coloring seen in the streams, and the sulfate is to blame for the foul odor, similar to that of rotten eggs. This polluted water flows from the mines into local streams where it decimates aquatic life. For example, of the 61.3 miles of Little Paint Creek, only a 3.2 mile section is listed as approved trout waters by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC). The Stonycreek Reassessment Project, sponsored by the Somerset Conservation District, has verified that the most severely impaired section of the main stem of the Stonycreek River is the section immediately downstream of the mouth of Paint Creek.

### How Does Pollution Impact Area Waterways?

When rain falls over land, pollutants are washed into nearby streams, rivers, and lakes. These pollutants degrade water quality by increasing harmful metals and chemicals, lowering oxygen levels, and destroying aquatic habitat, among other things. This is bad news for aquatic plants, bugs, and fish! Many fish and aquatic bugs have a low tolerance for large amounts of pollution. In addition, gill-breathing critters depend on high levels of oxygen in the water to live. Beyond the adverse effects pollution has on aquatic life, it can also impact our area’s economic, recreational, and tourism opportunities. By taking a proactive approach in protecting our waterways, we can reduce the cost of treating our drinking water, which means lower water bills for residents in the area. For these reasons, Paint Creek communities must work to reduce pollution entering our streams.

## **A Hopeful Future**

In 2000, the Paint Creek Regional Watershed Association (PCRWA) was created to “restore, enhance, and protect the Paint Creek watershed by engaging the public, fostering partnerships, and monitoring water quality.” A recent assessment of the Paint Creek watershed is directing PCRWA’s actions and funds for restoration projects are being sought.

To make it easier to assess the impacts of mine discharges on the Paint Creek watershed, it was divided into six management units: Upper Paint Creek, Babcock Creek, Middle Paint Creek, Seese Run, Little Paint Creek, and Lower Paint Creek. By dividing the watershed into these smaller units, PCRWA is able to determine which unit contributes the highest percentage of AMD.

### **Upper Paint Creek (UPC)**

This unit is comprised of over 7 stream miles from the headwaters of Paint Creek to its confluence with Babcock Creek. Sixteen AMD discharges were located in this unit, which affect the entire length of Paint Creek. By cleaning up the discharges in UPC, the water quality will substantially improve throughout the whole length of the stream.

### **Babcock Creek (BC)**

The BC management unit includes the entire BC sub-watershed, which is almost 5 stream miles long. By gathering water quality data, it was determined that nearly 80% of this sub-watershed is impaired by AMD discharges.

### **Middle Paint Creek (MPC)**

The MPC management unit is between where Babcock Creek flows into Paint Creek and the confluence of Paint and Little Paint Creeks. Most of this section flows through the urban boroughs of Windber, Paint, and Scalp Level. Through the assessment, 19 AMD discharges were identified.

### **Seese Run (SR)**

Seese Run is the second largest tributary to Paint Creek, and has 10 AMD discharges flowing into it.

### **Little Paint Creek (LPC)**

The LPC is comprised of 24.72 stream miles and is the largest tributary to Paint Creek. Much of LPC is not impacted by AMD; in fact, a small section of LPC is listed as approved trout waters by the PFBC, who stock it with brook trout each year.

### **Lower Paint Creek (LoPC)**

This section is below the confluence of Little Paint Creek and Paint Creek and extends to the mouth of Paint Creek, which empties into the Stonycreek River. There are 7 AMD discharges flowing into LoPC.



Photo: Mark Antonik

From the assessment of these management units, treatment options for the discharges were encouraged to improve the water quality of Paint Creek. These treatment options included adding limestone to neutralize the acidity of the water and utilizing wetlands to filter out metals. The treatment options are detailed in the [Paint Creek Restoration Plan](#), authored by Thomas Clark. The plan is available on the Kiski-Conemaugh Stream Team’s website at:

[www.kcstreamteam.org/paintcreek.htm](http://www.kcstreamteam.org/paintcreek.htm)

## **Renewed Recreation**

While much AMD remediation is needed to return Paint Creek and its tributaries to quality streams, many people still enjoy the recreation opportunities Paint Creek has to offer. Experienced whitewater enthusiasts love the challenge of the Class V rapids on Paint Creek as seen in the photograph below, which depicts a boater going over the 15 foot Sandy Falls on Paint Creek! Members of the Bens Creek Canoe Club regularly test their paddling skills on Paint Creek’s exciting, yet dangerous rapids. To learn more about whitewater opportunities in Paint Creek, visit the Bens Creek Canoe Club website at: [www.benscreekcanooclub.com](http://www.benscreekcanooclub.com).

A popular picnic area, Carpenter Park, is located adjacent to the mouth of Paint Creek where it flows into the Stonycreek River. Many locals and visitors use this park for camping, cookouts, and even swimming in the Stonycreek River, where the water quality has greatly improved due to remediation efforts by SCRIP and other local conservation organizations.

In addition to these recreational opportunities, the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy (CVC) and the Stonycreek Quemahoning Initiative are working to transform an old trolley line that runs by Carpenter Park into a walking and biking trail. This trail will connect to another trail that leads to Johnstown further downstream on the Stonycreek River. Find out more about CVC’s trail construction projects by visiting their website at: [www.conemaughvalleyconservancy.org](http://www.conemaughvalleyconservancy.org)

Due to the existing and potential recreation opportunities that Paint Creek has to offer and the cleanup efforts in the watershed, SCRIP predicts the Paint Creek watershed will be the next big success story in southwestern Pennsylvania. With the help of various conservation organizations, state agencies, and individual volunteers, Paint Creek can once again be the beautiful, pristine stream that once captivated so many people from this region and beyond.