Futaleufú and Puelo Rivers Become Chile's First Protected Rivers Through Environmental Flow Reserves

A landmark victory for local communities ensures the long-term protection of two of Patagonia's most iconic rivers and the livelihoods they sustain.

Futaleufú, Chile — The 3rd of November 2025 the Government of Chile officially declared the Futaleufú and Puelo Rivers as *Environmental Flow Reserves for ecological preservation purposes*, marking the first time this legal mechanism has been applied to protect rivers in the country. The declaration—confirmed by the Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic—represents a historic achievement driven by local communities and civil society who have long sought to conserve these vital ecosystems for future generations.

This new legal status safeguards a significant percentage of a river's flow, without affecting existing water use rights already granted in the basin. By safeguarding its waters, it ensures that activities traditionally carried out in connection with the river —such as recreational fishing, kayaking, rafting, recreation, small-scale agriculture, and subsistence livestock farming— can continue to take place.

"Protecting the waters of the Futaleufú has always been a priority for local residents," said Genaro Vega, representative of the *Futaleufú Fly Fishing Guides Association*. "With this declaration, tourism, recreational fishing, and our local culture can continue to thrive in harmony with the environment."

A Community-Led Conservation Effort

The protection of these rivers is the result of over a decade of organizing and advocacy led by residents of the Futaleufú and Puelo valleys. Initially formed to oppose hydroelectric projects proposed by Endesa (now Enel), the communities later advanced river conservation as a foundation for sustainable economic development—centered on ecotourism, small-scale agriculture, and cultural preservation.

Following the withdrawal of Endesa's water rights in several rivers across Chile, over the next few years, each community launched grassroot campaigns aimed at protecting their rivers using the Chilean Water Code, which was reformed in 2022 to include ecosystem preservation as a justification for water flow reserves. The campaigns to protect the Puelo (www.pueloreservadeagua.cl) and Futaleufú (www.porlasaguasdelfutaleufu.cl) Rivers have been community-driven and actively supported by respective mayors and regional authorities, receiving technical support from civil society and a wide range of NGOs and research centres.

Government and Expert Support

Rodrigo Sanhueza, Director General of Water, added: "The people of Futaleufú and Cochamó live from sustainable tourism, recreational fishing, and family farming. Their commitment to protecting these rivers reflects a balance between local development and biodiversity conservation."

Paulo Urrutia, Director of *Bestias del Sur Salvaje*, described the declaration as "a historic achievement in an era marked by uncertainty. A protected river means a community that is no longer threatened—a society choosing a development model that values nature as part of its future."

Amid growing water scarcity, Andrés Amengual, Director of the NGO *Puelo Patagonia*, highlighted the importance of the measure: “This decree is crucial to prevent projects that could endanger biodiversity or limit community access to water resources. Maintaining river flow is essential for the health of aquatic ecosystems, climate regulation, and the supply of drinking water. While we are pleased with this declaration, we are approaching its content and scope with caution, as it represents an important step forward that requires detailed technical analysis, since its proper implementation will be key to the future of the basin. .”

Collaboration has been key, states de Chilean Rivers Protection Coalition — this achievement has brought together local actors, neighborhood associations, rafting companies, municipalities, and organized civil society, and much more.

The Coalition, which brings together more than 15 civil society organizations and research centers working collaboratively to support the implementation of scientifically grounded, legally sound, and community-driven mechanisms for river protection across Chile — including water flow reserves — emphasizes the need for a national planning framework that establishes environmental flow reserves as a key tool to ensure local economic development and safeguard ecosystems in the face of advancing climate change.

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