

Slowly but Surely – A Few Dams Will Come Down

Dams are distributed on Oregon rivers great and small. From the smallest earthen barrier to the immense concrete of Bonneville, these dams create extensive modifications in habitat above and below their structures (see May 2006 Conservation Corner).

Consideration and planning for dam removal are huge undertakings. Several recent success stories in other parts of the country, coupled with pressure from citizens and environmental advocates, have led to decisions to breach some Oregon dams. Dam breaching is certainly controversial when the dam produces even small amounts of electricity. But many dams endure even when their original purpose faded away decades ago. A good example is the Brownsville Dam on the Calapooia River in the southern Willamette Valley. The dam was built for flax and woolen mills of the 1800s. Today the dam stands and creates challenging upstream passage for steelhead and nearly impossible passage for Chinook. Negotiations with local businesses and community members led to a decision to breach the dam and restore the local riparian habitat. Upstream habitat has already been improved by Weyerhaeuser Co. In 2008, the dam will come down. Chinook and steelhead will have access to their historical coast range habitat in upper reaches of the Calapooia.

The 90 year-old Marmot Dam on the Sandy River will be removed in 2007, while its sister, the Little Sandy Dam on the Little Sandy River comes down in 2008. Removal of these dams will not be without consequences to the river and its environs. A major concern is the volume of sediment that has accumulated behind the dams. The U.S. Geological Service has planned for extensive study of sediment dispersal and its effects on water quality. Portland General Electric (owner of the dam) has established a plan to work with government agencies to monitor sediment effects on the watershed and restore riparian areas. They will also donate 1,500 acres to a planned conservancy zone on the Sandy. Oregonians will have an opportunity to learn first hand what is involved with dam breaching on an important river for salmon and steelhead. The removal of Marmot Dam will provide valuable data that will help guide future dam removal in Oregon and elsewhere.

Another victory for fish may be at hand in southern Oregon. Removal of the Savage Rapids Dam on the Rogue River has been legislated and funds are supposedly forthcoming. This diversion dam was built for irrigation. It has provided inadequate fish passage during its entire 85 year history. With the Savage Rapids dam gone, threatened Coho salmon will have much improved access to miles of quality upstream habitat.

On a smaller scale, fish passage is improving in communities throughout Oregon. Neighborhood groups, government agencies, conservation groups, and businesses are working to remove obsolete dams and other barriers for fish. The idea is catching on in other countries as well and we can learn from their successes. An interesting link to information on dam removal can be found on the International Rivers Network page at <http://www.irn.org/revival/decom/index.php?id=orgs/orgs.html>. Locally, Waterwatch of Oregon has regular updates on dam removal proposals around our state. It is not likely that dam breaches on major rivers like the Columbia will be announced anytime soon.

Yet fish conservationists can look forward with interest as a few Oregon rivers step back in time when their manmade barriers are eliminated – and the fish rejoice!

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