

Time Brings Change, Restoration From the Maine Rivers Newsletter Making Waves, Fall 2010

The removal this summer of the West Winterport Dam on the North Branch of Marsh Stream in Waldo County marks a major step forward in the restoration of the Penobscot River watershed. Removal of the dam eliminates a four and a half-mile long impoundment and restores a large segment of the river to natural conditions. Water quality and ecological conditions in the former impoundment will improve dramatically with the return to a free-flowing river. A variety of sea-run fish have access to over 80 miles of habitat above the former dam site.

The dam's removal is a great success, but it almost never came to be. When removal was first proposed in 2001, fierce opposition emerged in the local communities. The removal was shelved in 2004. Over the next few years, some opponents of the dam removal left the scene, while others had a change of heart. The project eventually received approval from the local communities and moved ahead.

Ecological Overview

Sea-run fish species have regained access to 22 miles of free-flowing habitat in the mainstem of the North Branch of Marsh Stream, plus an additional 63 miles of tributaries. The North Branch of Marsh Stream offers spawning and nursery habitat for a number of anadromous fish species, including Atlantic salmon, sea-run brook trout, alewives, blueback herring, sea lamprey, and American shad, as well as adult habitat for the catadromous American eel.

With the removal of the dam, there is hope that the state and federal fisheries agencies will begin an active restoration program for Atlantic salmon in Marsh Stream, which could support a run of 80 to 100 adults.

The removal will also be particularly beneficial to two species of river herring: American shad and blueback herring. The Maine Department of Marine Resources estimates that the stream could support a run of 10,000 bluebacks. Resident brook trout will benefit from greater connectivity, while sea-run brook trout will regain access to historic habitat.

Long Road to Restoration

The origins of the dam on the North Branch of Marsh Stream at West Winterport are obscure. The ledge on the south bank in the Town of Frankfort is only eighty-five feet from the north bank in the Town of Winterport. A dam was erected to run a water-powered gristmill in the early 19th century, and later powered a sawmill. Early in the 1980s a federal law provided for subsidies to small hydroelectric generating facilities. John Jones then bought the old dam and refurbished it, installing turbines and a powerhouse.

When the subsidy expired toward the end of the 1990s, the West Winterport Dam ceased to be profitable. Jones had a white elephant on his hands. He still had to maintain the dam for safety reasons and remove the trash and debris which daily accumulated on the upstream side, but his economic incentive for operating the dam as a hydroelectric facility had vanished.

The climate seemed ripe for dam removal. The Edwards Dam removal in 1999 had garnered national attention, and Jones had previously removed two dams on nearby Souadabscook Stream in the Town of Hampden.

One of those dams had been removed in 1998 due to a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) order to either remove the dam or install fish passage. A photograph of Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt at the controls of a hydraulic ram assaulting the concrete ran in the Bangor Daily News.

With no controversy, the Maine Council of the Atlantic Salmon Federation (MCASF) had sponsored the Souadabscook dam removals, as well as the removal of a derelict dam on the Pleasant River in Brownville. MCASF undertook the permitting and fundraising to remove the West Winterport Dam. The process required approval by both FERC and the Maine Department of Environmental Protection (MDEP). Fishery agencies supported the dam removal for its restoration potential for sea-run fish.

Those involved expected a straightforward process. However, when the dam removal application became public, a firestorm of opposition arose in the towns of Winterport and Frankfort. Opponents made extravagant and groundless claims that the impoundment afforded protection against both fire and flooding. They said dam removal would bring about untold environmental and economic disasters, all of which was eventually disproven.

By the time MCASF had obtained approval from FERC and MDEP to remove the dam in late 2003, John Jones had suffered so much venom from his neighbors that he decided not to go forward. It was a miserable experience for Jones. MCASF was greatly disappointed.

For the next four years there was little movement. Jones was stuck maintaining a worthless dam that posed a threat to public safety and was degrading the health of the river. In 2005, he was told by the fisheries agencies that if the dam wasn't coming out, that he needed to repair the derelict fishway.

Facing yet another large expense, Jones worked to change local minds. In 2008, he asked the two towns to release him from his agreement not to remove the dam. Passions had cooled over time. Many people within both communities felt that Jones had been mistreated. Jones was released from his agreement, and the way was paved for the removal process to begin anew.

It also did not hurt that Jones, at his own expense, had installed a high quality "dry

hydrant” system for fire protection near the dam site readily accessible for both communities.

In time, the town planning boards gave their consent for dam removal through the shoreland zoning process. Both planning boards handled the matter professionally. Much credit should be given to them.

Working with Jones, MCASF obtained the necessary permits and funding to remove the West Winterport Dam. John Burrows of the Atlantic Salmon Federation (also the past- president of Maine Rivers) served as the project manager for the removal. “A few years ago, this was the most contentious dam removal project in Maine. But, this past winter, the permitting process was completed with absolutely no opposition. It’s remarkable how things changed.”

Burrows continued, “It is also incredible how much Marsh Stream has changed since the removal. The restored stream is incredibly complex. There are numerous riffle and runs; several large, deep pools; some backwaters; and even a bunch of small ledge drops and really large boulders. The banks are greening up and the channel is finding its way. I think that after some higher flows this autumn and next spring, Marsh Stream is going to be a beautiful little river.”