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Dam Removal Project on Pawcatuck River in Westerly and Stonington Will Benefit Fish and Reduce Flooding

The Nature Conservancy has begun removal of the 75-year-old and now obsolete White Rock Dam.

WESTERLY, RI — Work is underway on the removal of the White Rock dam in Westerly, R.I. and Stonington, Conn. In the coming months, the entire dam, the related structures and any submerged, wooden legacy dams will be removed from the Pawcatuck River.

The project will open up close to 25 miles of the Pawcatuck River and associated wetlands for migrating American shad, alewife, blueback herring, American eel, and sea-run trout.

The project is being paid for with federal funds as part of a \$1.98 million cooperative agreement between the Conservancy and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The demolition is being performed by SumCo Eco-Contracting of Salem, Mass. under a contract awarded by The Nature Conservancy.

“The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is a tremendous partner, and we’re working closely together on fish passage and other great conservation work all across the country,” said Terry Sullivan, Rhode Island state director for The Nature Conservancy.

The White Rock dam is located 7 miles from the mouth of the Pawcatuck River, where the flow has been altered since 1770. The current concrete structure – 108 feet long and 6 feet high – was built in 1940, following the 1938 hurricane and no longer serves a commercial purpose. It prevents 85 percent of the herring in the river from migrating upstream to their traditional spawning grounds. It also restricts the movement of non-migrating resident fish.

“Dam removal and fishway construction allow fish and other aquatic species use of more and better habitat critical for their survival in southern New England’s rivers,” said Sally Harold, director of river restoration and fish passage for The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut.

In 2013, in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, the USFWS was awarded \$167 million by the Department of the Interior for recovery and resilience projects. Service Northeast Regional Director Wendi Weber said the removal of the White Rock dam will reduce local flooding and eliminate the risk of dam failure in future storms.

“We’re proud to join with The Nature Conservancy in strengthening natural defenses along the Atlantic Coast to protect communities and wildlife against future storms,” Weber said. “By connecting and opening waterways like the Pawcatuck River, we can improve flood control, restore habitat for fish and wildlife and contribute to the local economy and quality of life.”

The White Rock dam is owned by the White Rock Trust of Westerly. The Nature Conservancy successfully negotiated a construction easement on this property along with access and staging area easements over property owned by Cherenzia & Associates on the Westerly side and Wescon Corporation on the Stonington side.

Additional partners on the project include the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, and the Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association,

which has led fish passage projects upstream at Lower Shannock Falls, Horseshoe Falls, and Kenyon Mill dams.

“The Nature Conservancy is grateful to all of our partners, who have helped move this urgent project forward. The Pawcatuck River and its tributary streams comprise one of the most pristine river systems in southern New England, and we’re excited to see this section flow freely for the first time in almost 250 years,” Sullivan said.

SumCo has installed cofferdams above and below the White Rock dam to temporarily re-route the Pawcatuck River’s flow while the demolition and excavation work are underway. The Nature Conservancy and SumCo expect to complete the project by late October.

To learn more about other U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Hurricane Sandy recovery and resilience projects, visit the [Hurricane Sandy Recovery website](#).

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