

# Going with the Flow: Restoring the West Fork River benefits people and wildlife

by John Schmidt and Frank Jernejcic | Posted: Sunday, March 29, 2015 12:00 am

The Clarksburg Water Board's approval Monday to remove three dams in the West Fork River is a decision that will benefit both people and wildlife in the river's surrounding communities of Harrison County, West Virginia.

Our goal in removing the dams is to preserve our national heritage and legacy of abundant fish and wildlife, with places for families to experience nature, enjoy waterways and go fishing.

The waterway will be returned to free-flowing conditions not seen in nearly a century. The projects, which also include modifying a fourth dam for fish passage, will alleviate a safety hazard, re-open nearly 40 miles of river and encourage expansion of native smallmouth bass and muskellunge populations.

The river will be accessible and safe for fishermen, kayakers and others enjoying the West Fork River Water Trail.

Good water flow for fish and paddlers alike is assured by the mandatory minimum water release from Stonewall Jackson Dam in upstream Lewis County.

In addition, removing these dams will encourage a more diverse and resilient river environment that flushes nutrients, pollutants and sediment, and supports thriving fish and freshwater mussel populations.

These dam removals would be the first of their kind in the state of West Virginia, according to the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection. Clarksburg will set a strong precedent for the future health of rivers in the state.

The right people have partnered with Clarksburg Water Board to ensure the success of this effort, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources



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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has vast experience in restoring rivers across the Northeast. Working closely with a diverse group of partners, we have improved water quality, reduced the effects of flooding and losses to property, and enhanced rivers for fish and other wildlife by removing more than 200 barriers to fish passage in the Northeast since 2009.

According to the peer-reviewed report, “Conserving America’s Fisheries: An Assessment of Economic Contributions from Fisheries and Aquatic Resource Conservation,” each mile of restored stream or river generates nearly \$543,000 in direct and indirect benefit to local and regional economies once the river is in full productivity.

For the nearly 40 miles of habitat opened on the West Fork, we expect increased visitation and use of hotels and restaurants, bait purchases, increased property values and improved water quality to benefit the local economy.

We have secured funding from the Service’s National Fish Passage Program to remove the first two dams and are seeking additional support for removing the third dam and modifying the fourth dam. We expect to complete all projects by fall 2016.

In recognition of the historical value of these dams to the community, we welcome discussion on ways to honor and pay tribute to the dams through interpretation or other means. We also encourage public input as we create fisherman and boater accesses at the restored dam sites.

The West Fork River watershed provides some of the most beautiful scenery in this region and is a valuable natural resource. We support and encourage recreational uses such as fishing, boating, hiking and wildlife observation.

When the water flow is restored, the natural improvements to the river and watershed will only enhance the outdoor recreational opportunities and provide an economic boost for eco-tourism.

We believe this is a win-win solution for the local economy and our conservation mission.