

FROM
**Catonsville
 TIMES**

Free Flowing

Officials say removing dams will help revitalize the Patapsco River

By Kevin Rector
 krector@patuxent.com

Posted 7/08/09



(Enlarge) Federal stimulus money will be used to remove the Simkins Dam, in photo, near Thistle and Gun roads, and the Union Dam over the next two years. Officials say the two Catonsville dams inhibit the flow of the Patapsco River. (Staff photo by Matt Roth)

Two defunct dams in the Patapsco River between Catonsville and Ellicott City will be removed in the next two years as part of a \$4 million river-restoration project paid for with federal stimulus funds, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Union Dam and Simkins Dam were built in the early 1900s to supply area textile mills with water power but serve no purpose today.

Instead, they impede the migration of fish and inconvenience and endanger recreational users of the river, according to state officials and activists for non-profit groups involved in the project.

The dams also inhibit the natural flow of the river, warming and decreasing the level of oxygen in its waters and collecting grainy sediment immediately upstream, said Jim

Thompson, a fish passage coordinator with the state Department of Natural Resources, which owns the Union Dam.

The Simkins Dam, off River Road near its intersection with Thistle Road, is owned by Simkins Industries Inc., which has agreed to the dam's removal, officials said.

The Union Dam, which was partially breached in 1972 during tropical storm Agnes, is just south of the Patapsco River Bridge that carries Route 40 between Baltimore and Howard counties.

The dams' removal has been in the works for years through a collaboration between DNR, NOAA, the national non-profit organization American Rivers and a local group, the Friends of the Patapsco Valley State Park.

"Simkins and Union are just a small part of a bigger puzzle that's going to be really good for restoration in the Patapsco," Thompson said.

A broader plan to remove a total of four dams from the river's lower section would include the Daniels Dam, upriver from the Simkins and Union dams, and the Bloede Dam, down river from them.

Both Daniels and Bloede are owned by DNR, officials said.

The removal project of the Simkins and Union dams is one of 50 habitat-restoration projects in more than 20 states across the country that NOAA announced it would pay for June 30 using \$167 million in funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

According to Kim Couranz, a spokeswoman at NOAA's Chesapeake Bay office, the 50 projects were selected from an "astonishing" 814 proposals -- partially through considerations of how many jobs they promised to create, a key component of the stimulus legislation.

According to Serena McClain, associate director of American Rivers' river-restoration program, the two removals are expected to create 42 jobs in construction, engineering and technical and scientific consulting

for an estimated 51-week period.

"We worked with a contractor to come up with those figures," she said. "We even have it broken down into the number of hours."

Feasibility and design work has already been completed on the Union Dam's removal, which is set to begin in September, pending a contract bidding process. It will likely take six months, McClain said.

Design plans for the removal of the Simkins Dam are still in the works.

Its removal -- likely a three- to four-month job -- won't begin until late next summer or early the following fall, McClain said.

The overall project also includes a five-year monitoring program that DNR will use to determine the effects of the two dams' removal on the health of the river and its ecosystem, Thompson said.

"We're hoping that with success of the removals at Union and Simkins dams, that Bloede will be the next piece of the puzzle to come out," he said.

"From an ecological standpoint, removal of all the dams would be great."

DNR is already working on a feasibility study for the removal of Bloede, where several people have died over the years.

The dam's removal is complicated by the fact that it is on the National Register of Historic Places, according to DNR. Removing the Daniels Dam will likely depend on the success of the current project.

While alternatives to removal will be considered, removing the dams may be the only solution for depleted fish populations, Thompson said.

According to Thompson, DNR attempted to address the issue about 15 years ago by installing "Denil fish ladders" -- which create a series of ramps and rapids that fish can migrate through -- on the Simkins, Daniels and Bloede dams.

They weren't installed on Union Dam because of its breach, which Thompson estimated is 20 feet wide.

Thompson said the fish ladders work for some species, though not as well as DNR had hoped.

They don't work for the American eel, which Thompson said is the primary target specie for the dam-removal project. The ladders also require constant maintenance.

"The fish ladders just don't do the job at all," said Jim Palmer, vice president of the Friends group.

"They end up clogged with debris, and it's a maintenance nightmare," Palmer said.

Aside from eels, resident fish like bass that don't migrate but "still move up and down the river seasonally for different food sources and shelter," also will benefit, Thompson said.

Shad and herring populations, which historically were strong in the Patapsco but are now quite low, also could grow, though that's not a certainty and would take a long time to occur, Thompson said.

Apart from the benefits to nature, the dams' removal will be "awesome" for kayak and canoe enthusiasts, according to Teddy Betts, an avid kayaker from Ellicott City.

"For us, it will mean one less get out," he said, noting those boaters on the river usually have to get out upstream from the dams and walk along the shore until they are downstream.

Betts said he's excited to see what the river will look like after the dams are removed.

"I think when it flushes itself out, when it cleans itself, it will get back to what the river needs to be doing, which is flowing unimpeded by the dams that don't serve any purpose," Betts said.

"It'll change the river," he said. "It'll bring it back to what it was."

"And that's a good thing."

user comments (0)