

It's now a 'dam' irritation

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A month ago, Musconetcong Watershed Association (MWA) President Bill Leavens was upset because the long-sought removal of the flow-choking Gruendyke Mill Dam on the Musconetcong River was being delayed.

There have been many delays during the seven years the MWA has worked on the dam removal project. Many were bureaucratic in nature, and that was the case again last month when the state Division of Fish and Wildlife had questions.

Removal of the old structure will be good for Musconetcong's fish, especially trout, and Fish and Wildlife generally supports free-flowing streams. So Leavens predicted in September that the dilapidated dam near Hackettstown would be gone before October. Indeed, Fish and Wildlife gave its nod of approval soon thereafter and another source of red-tape indigestion -- approval of the project by state historic preservation officials -- was finally received. Leavens' quest for big boulders, needed to construct current-slowng weirs in the river after the dam is removed, was successful as Trout Unlimited State Council Vice Chairman Brian Cowden secured boulder donations by K. Hovnanian Developers and Mountain View Development & Contracting Co. Optimistic everything finally seemed to be falling into place, Leavens predicted the dam would be gone by the end of September.

Will he ever learn to stop with the optimism? October is nearly gone and the dam, or what's left of it, is still there.

You can see it from Route 46 as you leave Hackettstown heading east. And if you'd been in the neighborhood Friday, you might have glimpsed Leavens, Cowden and other interested parties hanging around at streamside.

"Bill Leavens was a very young man when this all began," joked Cowden.

The latest snafu is, as might be expected, more tribulations with Trenton.

The state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the same agency that wanted the dam removed in the first place all those years ago, has yet to issue the final permit for the project, said the volunteers.

"The permit, to my knowledge, is still not issued," said Leavens, his tone expressing disbelief. "Permits were applied for in January. It's supposed to be roughly a 90-day permit review process. The permit was complete and accepted as complete in January." To be specific, the DEP Division of Land Use Regulation is now holding up the show, according to Leavens, Cowden and Trout Unlimited Treasurer/Northern Region Vice President Rick Ege.

"I wouldn't call it negligence at DEP," said Cowden. "But the bottom line is these people just have no plan to do this, and one hand doesn't know what the other hand is doing. There is no process set up at the DEP to get these things through. They just totally

disregard the promises they make to process these permits. And when there's a hold-up, there's no contact back from DEP saying they have problems. It just sits until we call and ask, 'What's the problem?'"

A message left Friday with the DEP was not returned.

"If only they listened to me seven years ago and came here with some dynamite in the middle of the night," kidded Ege.

"It's absurd," added Leavens. "DEP Dam Safety said 'Fix or remove the dam' and here we are, nearly a year after we raised all the funding, all of which has been county, federal and private money, not one dollar of state money, and the state's the one that's in the way. We'd like to get going on this ... Once we get the general permit, we're good to go."

Leavens is not about to let the bureaucrats diminish the MWA's determination to unclog the river. Once the Gruendyke Dam and a smaller one just upstream are dismantled, the association wants to begin working on removal of several other unnecessary impoundments on the river.

That will involve dealing with the DEP, a fact of life that rates on par with visits to the dentist. "We worked with them since day one, but it's just painful," said Cowden. "We constantly have to be initiating the conversations."