

# The Express-Times

## Group after dam-free river

**Musconetcong Watershed Association says 20 obstructions are obsolete, hampering recreation.**

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**BY LYNN OLANOFF**

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Musconetcong River aficionados have plans to return the river to its wild state.

The Musconetcong Watershed Association is working to remove the more than 20 dams from the nationally designated wild and scenic river.

All the dams date back more than 100 years when several mills lined the 42-mile river that separates Warren and Hunterdon counties. Now that all the mills are closed -- FiberMark paper mill in Holland Township was the last to do so in April 2006 -- the dams no longer serve a purpose, Musconetcong Watershed Association President Bill Leavens said.

"The whole point of this is to allow free water movement and fish passage," Leavens said. "It's a beautiful river for fishing, kayaking, canoeing."

Removing all the dams is seen as at least a 10-year project but plans to remove the first dam are already under way.

Association members hoped to remove the Gruendyke Dam between Hackettstown and Mount Olive Township in Morris County this summer but an obstacle arose in receiving state approval, Leavens said. Someone objected to the dam's removal because of claims it's historically significant, he said.

Association members disagree. Almost nothing remains of the mill that used to sit on the site and it is not included in Hackettstown's historic area, Leavens said.

Town Councilman Joe Bristow agreed the area is not of great historical significance. He said placing a historic marker at the site would be appropriate but not saving the dam.

"I think the water quality issues and the idea to improve fish habitat takes precedence over the historic claim," Bristow said.

Any objection to the dam's removal would be considered as part of the state Department of Environmental Protection's review process, department spokeswoman Elaine Makatura said Wednesday. The DEP is still reviewing the dam removal application, she said.

The Gruendyke Dam is owned by Rodger and Eileen Cornell, owners of the adjacent Pump House restaurant in Mount Olive. After the August 2000 flood that washed out another Musconetcong River dam, they were told to either repair or remove their dam.

The Cornells partnered with the Musconetcong Watershed Association to remove it. In exchange for the association paying for the dam's removal, the Cornells plan to give it open space they own on the Hackettstown side of the river.

Together they've raised the almost \$200,000 needed for the dam removal and land purchase.

Warren County contributed the \$70,000 needed for the land purchase.

"It's a win-win," Rodger Cornell said. "Warren County gets fishing access from that side and I don't have to worry about the dam anymore."

The Musconetcong Watershed Association is looking to give Hackettstown the open space in exchange for removing a town-owned dam on the river.

Leavens has broached the idea to town Administrator Bill Kuster, who said the town might be agreeable to removing the Seber Dam if funding is available.

Fifty years ago, the dam provided for the town-run swimming hole. But after the river became too polluted in the 1970s, the swimming hole was closed and the town built its pool.

Since "I don't think there's been any valued recognized in keeping the dam," Kuster said.

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