

NOTE: The identical article also ran in the Delaware Valley News

Hunterdon County Democrat

Conservation group says: Remove obsolete dams

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By John Monteith

The Musconetcong River will once again flow unimpeded to the Delaware River, if the Musconetcong Watershed Association has its way. The nonprofit conservation group wants 20 to 30 dams removed from the river, including ones built for the former Riegel paper mills in Hughesville and Warren Glen in Holland Township.

The 44-mile long Musconetcong, which separates Hunterdon and Warren counties, is a federally designated Wild and Scenic River. It rises from Lake Hopatcong and joins the Delaware opposite Riegelsville.

The river was dammed extensively about 100 years ago as a source of power for businesses and families, said Beth Styler Barry, Watershed Association executive director.

"Right now none are serving their original purpose," said Barry. An exact number is unknown, she said, because most are on private property and "could be well off the beaten track."

Dams slow the river's flow and create ponds. The slower flow translates to higher water temperatures, she said, and results in lower levels of the dissolved oxygen required to sustain aquatic life. Additionally, silt formed by the slower water flow traps contaminants, she said.

"Any contamination will be concentrated," said Barry. "In this part of New Jersey, there's a constant mixing of surface and ground water, which we drink. Our interest in better water quality is not only for the fish."

Removing the dams would improve recreational uses, she said, such as kayaking and fishing.

The watershed association has started discussions with property owners about eliminating the dams, Barry said.

With few exceptions, owners view the dams as little more than a liability, said Barry. Some weren't aware that they became responsible for the dams when they bought their properties.

Several dams on the upper portion of the river failed during heavy rains in 2000, she said. Subsequently, the state notified owners that dams must be professionally inspected. At some point owners could be required to repair and maintain the dams.

Although "some adamantly refuse to admit they own a dam," said Barry, "at this time we have plenty of dam owners willing to work with us."

The largest of the dams on the lower part of the Musconetcong lies about a mile from the shuttered FiberMark plant in Warren Glen, formerly a Riegel paper mill. Removing the dam would cost about \$200,000.

"We need to find funding," said Barry. She's hoping for help from nonprofit environmental groups, local governments, and the state Department of Environmental Protection. Removing the dams could take 10 years, said Barry, and require numerous impact studies

