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The saviors of the dammed

Returning a river to a wild state

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The dams are relics of western New Jersey's industrial past, when rivers were the chief power source for the mills that drove the rural economy.

But today, the 20 or so dams lining the Musconetcong River are more or less useless, officials say. Mostly, they block fish from migrating up and downstream, and prevent canoeists and kayakers from paddling the length of a river that Congress last year declared "wild and scenic."

Many of the dams are not maintained, causing concern they could eventually fail and cause flooding downstream.

That's why the Musconetcong Watershed Association, a nonprofit group dedicated to the river's health, wants to get rid of them -- starting with the Gruendyke Dam, a 19th-century hunk of masonry that once powered a sawmill at Hackettstown.

"No dam on the river serves any purpose whatsoever," said Bill Leavens, the association's president. "What we're literally doing is restoring the river to its (pre-industrial) wild and scenic status."

About 40 feet long and 6 feet high, the Gruendyke Dam is visible from Route 46 as it spans the river between Hackettstown and Mount Olive. It is owned by Rodger Cornell, who owns the Pump House restaurant on the Mount Olive side and a one-acre undeveloped tract on the Hackettstown side.

Cornell, who first approached the watershed association about removing the dam after a freak storm in 2000 damaged several other dams in the area, is as eager as anyone to see it go.

In exchange for \$70,000 that will go toward the removal cost, Cornell recently closed a deal with Warren County to sell a conservation easement on the Hackettstown side of the river. He wanted the land left undeveloped, since it is part of the view enjoyed by his customers who dine outside in warmer weather.

"Everyone benefits from this thing," he said. "I get to keep the pretty view, and I get rid of something that's been bugging me for 30 years, ever since I bought the property."

The total price tag is expected to top \$200,000, Leavens said, including the cost of environmental remediation -- planting trees and shrubs and so on -- along the riverbank once the pond drains.

Along with the money from Warren County, the watershed association has secured a \$40,000 commitment from Morris County, plus a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Resource Conservation Service. Trout Unlimited and other nonprofit groups also have chipped in.

Leavens is married to Morris County Freeholder Director Margaret Nordstrom, who recused herself from the discussions when the freeholder board considered contributing to the removal effort.

With permit approval still pending from the state Department of Environmental Protection, Leavens said he expects the Gruendyke to be history by this fall.

Elaine Makatura, a spokeswoman for the DEP, said the state generally approves removal of aging dams if their owners don't have the means to maintain them. Also, engineers must take care to control the flow of silt that has built up behind the dam over the years.

Barring that, though, "a properly designed dam removal project can have many environmental benefits," Makatura said.

Leavens said only the center portion of the dam would be removed, leaving "wings" that should prevent flooding and allow silt buildup to wash down the river gradually. The current silt buildup has left the pond behind the dam about two feet deep, he said.

The association also hopes to take out the remains of another dam, Sieber Dam, owned by Hackettstown, less than a mile upstream.

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