



BREAKING NEWS

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Hopewell Mills Dam Removal Begins in Taunton

Mill River Dams Will Be Removed to Benefit Public Safety, Ecology

TAUNTON, MA – Excavators today began chipping away at concrete that has held back the Mill River for decades. Within days, the impoundment behind the Hopewell Mills Dam will drop, and the river will begin to transform, opening up fish and wildlife habitat that hasn't been available for nearly 200 years.

A partnership of nonprofit groups and state and federal agencies has brought about the Mill River Restoration, a project that will involve the removal or retrofit of several dams on this important Taunton River tributary, allowing migratory species like river herring and American eel to access an additional 30 miles of river habitat, as well as upstream lakes and ponds. Hopewell Mills Dam is first barrier that herring encounter as they're traveling upstream from the sea, via the Taunton River, and is the first dam to be removed from the Mill River.

"Northeastern rivers average seven dams for every 100 miles of stream – some of the most fractured river systems in the country. By restoring the Mill River's connection to the Taunton River watershed, we can bring this system back to life, allowing hundreds of thousands of river herring access to upstream areas they haven't been able to reach in generations," said Alison Bowden, director of freshwater conservation at The Nature Conservancy.

The Taunton River is one of the only free-flowing rivers in New England, and restoring fish passage to a major tributary like the Mill River, will have great significance for the river's famed river herring run, which is one of the largest in the region. Many more fish will then return to Narragansett Bay, where they will feed the groundfish that are so critical to New England's commercial fishing industry and culture.

"The Mill River is an important tributary to the Taunton River, and the Taunton is a major source of fresh water to Narragansett Bay. The health of this extraordinarily productive estuary depends upon clean water and free flowing tributaries," said Jonathan Stone, executive director of Save the Bay.

“This project is a milestone in restoring the Mill River to its natural state, reopening miles of critical habitat to migratory fish and promoting the recovery of Narragansett Bay’s once abundant native fisheries,” Stone said.

Precautions are being taken to ensure that fish are not being disturbed by the project, which was timed to avoid the annual river herring run. A temporary screen will also keep fish from entering the construction site.

Local people, too, will benefit from the Mill River Restoration. Hopewell Mills Dam was built in 1818, and like many of the more than 3,000 dams on Massachusetts rivers, it was constructed to power mills that no longer exist.

“The Hopewell Dam Removal project is the product of an outstanding local, regional, state and federal partnership. The project not only addresses ecological restoration and overall environmental health, but the public safety issues associated with obsolete, deteriorating dams. Moreover, with a local contractor winning the bid to do the work, the Greater Taunton Area will receive an economic boost as well,” said Bill Napolitano, environmental program director at the Southeastern Regional Planning & Economic Development District in Taunton.

All across the region, century-old dams are deteriorating, and if they were to fail, dangerous flooding could occur. In fact, Taunton’s Mill River received national attention in 2005 when the threat of failure at Whittenton Pond Dam – located just upstream from Hopewell Mills – forced the evacuation of downtown.

The crisis prompted the formation of the Mill River Restoration partnership, as well as legislative efforts to make the removal and repair of aging dams easier for Massachusetts communities. Removal of the Whittenton Pond Dam will most likely occur later this fall or spring 2013 as the second phase of the Mill River Restoration.

“American Rivers commends the Commonwealth’s proactive approach to remove obsolete dams such as Hopewell Mills before they can become a problem,” said Bob Irvin, President of American Rivers. “Massachusetts continues to be a national leader at restoring rivers through dam removal, having removed 15 dams in the last five years to improve public safety, restore fisheries, and reconnect communities with their rivers.”

Over the next few years, the partnership plans to remove or install fish passage at three dams on the Mill River to restore native alewives and blueback herring to the Canoe River, Snake River, Lake Sabbatia and Winnecunnet Pond.

The Hopewell Mills Dam removal is expected to be complete by October 2012. The total cost of the project, including planning, construction and archeological surveys to ensure that the work does not disrupt any historic sites, will be about \$800,000. A significant portion of that funding comes from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Restoration Center.

“We invest in habitat restoration because we know it strengthens our nation’s fisheries,” said Sam Rauch, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the NOAA Fisheries Service. “More spawning areas for herring will help boost these important prey fish populations. That in turn will support populations of striped bass, summer flounder and other economically important recreational and commercial fisheries.”

By next spring, river herring will make their run upstream, and the Mill River will be able to ebb and flow, naturally moderating water levels and protecting nearby homes and businesses. The five-acre impoundment behind the Hopewell Mills Dam will be an open, meadow-like floodplain where such species as painted turtle, cedar waxwing and kingfisher will likely live. And perhaps, Taunton will again be known as “herring town.”

Fast Facts:

- Dams were first constructed on the Mill River in the late 1600s. Hopewell Mills Dam was built in 1818.
- Removing the dam will require moving 16,000 cubic yards of earth – more than 1,300 dump trucks full.
- The Mill River Restoration will make 30 miles of river habitat available for river herring and other species.

Photographs are available and reporters are welcome to visit the site. For interviews or site access, please contact the partners listed above.

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The Mill River Restoration Partnership includes dam owners, Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, MA Division of Ecological Restoration, NOAA-Restoration Center, The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Save the Bay, American Rivers, US Fish and Wildlife Service, MA Division of Marine Fisheries, MA Department of Transportation, Mass Audubon, Taunton River Watershed Alliance, and the Massachusetts Environmental Trust.