

National Management Measures to Control Nonpoint Source Pollution from Hydromodification

Chapter 9: Dam Removal Requirements, Process, and Techniques

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<http://www.epa.gov/owow/nps/hydromod/index.htm>

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Chapter 2 provided a discussion of specific impacts from dams, water quality above and below the dam, suspended sediment and recharge issues, and biological and habitat impacts. Chapter 4 then provided a discussion of types of dams, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requirements, management measures and practices that can be used to mitigate for some of the effects of dams, and information to consider when contemplating removing a dam. Chapter 9 focuses on what occurs after the decision has been made to remove a dam. This chapter provides a more detailed discussion on some permitting requirements for removing dams, the dam removal process, and sediment removal techniques to consider when removing a dam.

Requirements for Removing Dams

Removing a dam may require evaluations and permits from state, federal, and local authorities. These requirements are typically to ensure that the removal is done in a manner that is safe and minimizes short and long term impacts to the river and floodplain. States and local governments have different requirements. The following federal requirements may apply to dam removal:

- Rivers and Harbors Act Permit
- FERC License Surrender or Non-power License Approval
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Review
- Federal Consultations (Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation, Magnuson-Stevenson Act Consultation, National Historic Preservation Act Compliance)
- State Certifications (Water Quality Certification, Coastal Zone Management Act Certification)

The following state requirements might apply to dam removal:

- Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 Dredge and Fill Permit
- Waterway Development Permits
- Dam Safety Permits
- State Environmental Policy Act Review
- Historic Preservation Review
- Resetting the Floodplain
- State Certifications

Demolition and building permits may also be required for dam removal. Individual state and local governments may have additional requirements as well.

Tips for a Successful Permitting Process (American Rivers, 2002b)

Dam removal is relatively new and the permitting process can be difficult. Most state and federal agencies are not yet practiced at moving dam removal through the permitting process. The relevant permitting requirements were designed for more destructive activities, and dam removal does not easily fit into the requirements. Tips to help make the process smoother include:

Schedule Time

- *Expect dam removal projects to take longer than construction efforts.*
- *Schedule more lead-time into the permitting process to avoid delays and frustrations.*

Establish a Relationship with the Permitting Agencies

- *Hold a pre-application meeting with key agency staff once your project is well thought out.*
- *Do not attempt to circumvent the process and stick with the permitting timeline.*
- *Do not provide inconsistent information.*
- *A single point of contact for the group applying for the permit will help avoid confusion and maintain communication.*

Providing Information about the Proposed Project

- *Create clear and simple descriptions and drawings (to scale) of the proposed project.*
- *Be sure to identify complicating conditions, schedules, seasonal constraints, etc.*
- *Provide and discuss alternatives, but make it clear why the chosen approach should be used.*
- *Assume the reviewers know nothing about your project.*

Dam Removal Process

The complexity of the removal process of a dam is specific to each particular case of removal. There are two major components of the removal process: the stakeholders involved in the decision-making process of removing the dam and the actual physical removal of the dam itself. The authorities that govern dams are numerous, yet overlapping. These entities include: USACE, Bureau of Reclamation, FERC, and other federal agencies; interest groups; and state and local governments. There are also various state programs that have been created to keep dams safe and environmentally friendly, as well as to help owners finance dam removal. A study by the Aspen Institute (2002) provides a list of priority issues to consider when dam removal may be a possibility. Among the considerations listed are dam and public safety, economics, environmental concerns, risk, social values and community interests, scientific information, and stakeholder participation. This report suggests that success of dam removal is dependent upon a thorough analysis of these competing factors and input from all interested parties (Aspen Institute, 2002). Often, the dam owner makes the decision to remove a dam, deciding that the costs of continuing operation and maintenance are greater than the cost of removing the dam. However, state dam safety offices can order for a dam to be removed if there are safety concerns; FERC can order removal of dams under their jurisdiction for environmental and safety reasons (American Rivers, n.d.a.).

State governments have authority over the dams in their jurisdiction. Other state and local government agencies dealing with issues such as water quality, water rights, and fish and wildlife protection can also play a role in overseeing dams within their jurisdiction if they so choose

(FOE et al., 1999). Certain states have implemented stringent rules for dams that are and are not regulated by FERC or USACE. For example, the state of Wisconsin has a Dam Safety Inspection Program that requires dams to be inspected every 10 years by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) (Doyle et al., 2000). Any dam that fails to meet safety requirements set by WDNR must be repaired or removed. The state of Pennsylvania has implemented a law that was written under the order of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission that states that any newly constructed or existing dam that requires a state permit for construction or modification must also include provisions for fish passage (Doyle et al., 2000).

Some states have programs that aid dam owners in the process of removing their structures. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has adopted procedures to make it easier and less expensive for dam owners to remove unsafe, unused, or unwanted dams. In this process, owners of dams on third order or larger streams are contacted and asked if they are interested in removing their dams. If they are, then all the landowners affected by the removal are contacted, and a public meeting is held if interest warrants one. After public comments, an engineering design is created, followed by an environmental assessment, then sediment and erosion control (ESC) plans are established, and finally approval is sought by the USACE. This program was used in the removal of seven dams on Conestoga River and also in the removal of the Williamsburg Station Dam on the Juniata River. This approval process takes between 12 and 18 weeks (FOE et al., 1999). However, the physical decommissioning and removing of a dam can still be a lengthy and diversified process.

Sediment Removal Techniques

Large dams can trap thousands to millions of cubic yards of sediment over time, eliminating the flood control or storage capacity of the dam. Removal or control of sediment behind a dam can represent a large portion of the cost and planning effort of a dam removal project. There are several methods available to project planners and dam owners that target different pollution concerns and budgetary limitations (International Rivers Network, 2003). The options in terms of sediment removal range from complete removal and relocation of all accumulated material from the inundated regions; removing sediment only from the anticipated channel of the river, or allowing the river to erode a new channel through the sediment (Wunderlich et al., 1994).

If the sediment is basically clean and the main concern is turbidity and clogging downstream streambed spawning areas, gradual incremental drawdowns of the reservoir behind the dam allow the sediment to be transported downstream in smaller portions and avoids the release one large, lethal volume of sediment. If contaminated sediment is the main concern, dredging is an option that can be used. While the use of silt curtains can minimize turbidity during dredging, silt curtains do not contain dissolved substances such as metals, which can pose a threat to downstream ecosystems (EMC2, 2001). Another option for contaminated sediments is to stabilize the sediment in place within the stream. This can be accomplished by leaving a portion of the dam in place to hold back an area of sediment that is of concern. The strategic placement of boulders can also contain the sediment from moving downstream.

For more information on issues associated with dam removal, see the Additional Resources section of this document.