

Funding and Permitting Small Dam Removals for Fish Passage in Washington State

Abstract:

The interest in small dam removals is becoming increasingly greater in the Pacific Northwest, and throughout the country. Many non-hydroelectric dams constructed in the early to mid-1900s are derelict facilities that no longer function as originally intended. Most legacy dams were built without provisions for fish passage, and as a result, have since blocked or limited access to spawning and rearing grounds. The removal of dams provides a mechanism to restore pre-dam ecological conditions in a watershed, and benefits not only the fish that were formerly blocked from access to upstream habitat, but the predators that consume them.

This discussion will focus on two small dam removals at ecologically different sites in the state of Washington. The primary purpose of each dam was to divert surface water to municipal water and irrigation systems. The first dam is the Middle Fork Nooksack River Dam, located on a tributary to the Puget Sound. The second dam is Nelson Dam, located on a tributary to the Yakima River in central Washington. The Middle Fork Nooksack River Dam was removed in 2020. The Nelson Dam Removal project is currently underway, and a majority of the dam was removed in 2021. This presentation will briefly discuss the funding pathways and stakeholder avenues pursued for these projects, and dive into some details relative to the design, permitting pathways, and timelines required to obtain regulatory approvals.