



*America the Undammed*

More miles of the country's rivers were reconnected last year thanks to dam removals than at any other time in history.



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By **Cara Buckley**

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Even though the two dams spanning the river in Bedford, Pa., were old, troublesome and functionally useless, locals just couldn't quit them.

The dams were built for swimming and fishing, but so much silt had built up that the river was mere inches deep. They trapped debris, worsened flooding and thwarted migratory fish. They were also falling apart, drawing warnings from the Environmental Protection Agency that they would have to be replaced, repaired or removed, at local taxpayer expense.

Yet the people of Bedford had grown attached to the dams, which dated back 50 years. Some also believed, wrongly, that the barriers housed important utility wires or cables. "Somebody always came forward and gave a concrete reason those dams could not possibly be removed," said Kenny Fetterman, who sits on the Bedford Borough Council.

He was determined to find a fix, and spearheaded an effort that led to the dams' removal last summer. "Now the river is so much cleaner," said Mr. Fetterman, who as far as he knows is not related to Senator John Fetterman, Democrat of Pennsylvania. "The quality of water has improved drastically. There's freshwater clams in there."

It was part of what might be called the undamming of America.

Last year, more sections of the country's rivers were reconnected thanks to dam removals than at any other time in history, according to the nonprofit group American Rivers. In 2025, more than 100 dams were dismantled in 30 states,

reconnecting around 4,900 miles of waterways, including 156 miles of a branch of the Juniata River that are now reconnected thanks to the removal of Bedford's two dams.

The resulting free-flowing waterways are healthier, cooler and less prone to algal blooms, and serve as vital habitat for migratory fish and other aquatic life.



A sign near the Dock Street Dam on the Susquehanna River in Harrisburg, Pa. Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

They're also safer. The average age of America's dams is 60 years. While dams that are critical for flood regulation, water storage or irrigation must stay in place, many no longer serve their original purpose and are at risk of collapse.

"Our dams aren't getting younger," said Serena McClain, who oversees the dam removal program for American Rivers. "With more extreme weather, more and more of these structures are failing over time. If we don't remove them, Mother Nature is going to do it for us."

It is unclear exactly how many dams are scattered across America.

The National Inventory of Dams, compiled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, lists about 92,000 dams, nearly 17,000 of which are deemed high hazard risks should they fail. But, according to the National Aquatic Barrier Inventory, there are hundreds of thousands of smaller and unregulated structures that block waterways.

The majority were built to create swimming and fishing holes or reservoirs for water supplies, or to generate power and irrigate farm fields. Most are privately owned and increasingly obsolete, making them a liability both for people and the environment. Low-head dams, which are designed to have water flow over them, create a recirculating current downstream that can trap people and debris. They're known as "drowning machines" and have caused nearly 800 reported fatalities.

There is broad bipartisan support for dam safety and repair, according to Del Shannon, a geotechnical engineer and dam expert. "We're one of the few areas where those guys can agree on," said Mr. Shannon, who helped write the American Society of Civil Engineers Infrastructure Report Card, which gave American dams a D-plus grade.

But federal money allocated to rehabilitate and remove dams is far less than what's needed, Mr. Shannon said.



The Dock Street Dam on the Susquehanna. The majority of U.S. dams were built decades ago to create swimming and fishing holes or reservoirs for water supplies, among other uses. Andrew Mangum for The New

A 2025 report by the Association of State Dam Safety Officials estimated that rehabilitating all non-federally owned dams would cost about \$165.2 billion (the federal government owns just 4 percent of dams).

While the 2021 infrastructure law earmarked \$3 billion for dam repair and removal, Congress has since reallocated \$364 million. Under the Trump administration, many federal grants for dam removal and safety have also stalled amid staffing and budget cuts. And it has pushed back against some removals.

In April, the Trump administration intervened in PG&E's decommissioning of two hydropower dams in Northern California. The two dams have not produced electricity since 2021 because of equipment failure and the utility determined that fixing the equipment didn't make economic sense.

But the administration said they were needed for water security. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins wrote on X that the decommissioning reflected a policy of "putting fish over people."



Kayakers last June on a section of the Klamath River at Kikaceki Canyon that was dry until a dam was removed in 2023. Laure Andrillon/Reuters

Hydropower dams have been a source of inexpensive energy, but the cost of repairs and relicensing can outstrip the benefits, said Desiree Tullos, a professor in biological and ecological engineering at Oregon State University. And fewer than 3 percent of the country's dams generate power.

In 2023 and 2024, four major hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River in Oregon and California were dismantled, the biggest dam removal project in history. It was touted as an environmental win, but the main reason PacifiCorp, the owner, opted to take down the dams is because it was cheaper than leaving them in place. The Trump administration has since clawed back funds for the river's ecological restoration.

Dr. Tullos said there are some scenarios where it doesn't make sense to remove dams, such as when stored sediment is contaminated and remediation proves too expensive. But, she added, "the economic and environmental costs of maintaining obsolete dams never seems to justify any potential benefits."

She noted that the country's big dams are outnumbered by smaller ones that often do more harm than good. "The vast majority are these dinky little dams," Dr. Tullos said "There's just so many of these deadbeat dams on the landscape."

By all accounts, Bedford's dams were decidedly deadbeat.

After the dams were built, they quadrupled the river's width and trapped swept-away trees, other debris and sediment. It wasn't uncommon to see hapless carp flopping in the upstream shallows, while thwarted perch and bass milled below the dam downstream.

"In the summers, you could pretty much walk across the river and not get your ankles wet," said Jeff Rinscheid, a former Borough Council member.



**Kenny Fetterman, dam removal champion and member of the Bedford Borough Council. Andrew Mangum for The New York Times**

As time passed, the borough received warnings that the dams would have to be removed or repaired. But the council determined that rehabilitating the dams would cost local taxpayers millions of dollars.

Nothing much happened until 2021, when Mr. Fetterman, a musician, landlord and lifelong skateboarder, was elected to the Borough Council. He wanted to improve Bedford's neglected riverfront, and removing the dams was key.

After speaking with various government agencies, he eventually got in touch with American Rivers. A representative, Lisa Hollingsworth-Segedy, presented a plan to the Borough Council, as well as an irresistible sweetener: American Rivers could take out the dams at no cost to the local community. The removal plan was approved.

The removals cost \$230,000, paid for by foundation money and federal funds.

Last summer, excavators drove into the river in Bedford, and began taking the two dams apart. Within weeks, both were gone.

And, at first, the people of Bedford were aghast.

Without the dams stretching it out sideways, the river contracted, exposing a bleak mudscape riddled with debris. One day, Mr. Fetterman waded into the silty terrain to pull out what looked like half a dozen car tires. He ended up spending a week there, hauling out 118 tires, while getting an earful for being the guy responsible for the mess.



Rubble remaining from the Bedford dam removal; Mr. Fetterman at the now undammed river. Andrew Mangum for The New York Times

“People would go down and they’d say, ‘Well, this looks terrible, this is awful — I can’t believe you would do this,’” Mr. Fetterman recalled.

He told them to wait. “Nature is going to correct itself,” he said.

Slowly, over the next few months, the river flushed itself out and began finding its channels again. Last fall, Mr. Fetterman planted 35 pounds of winter rye seeds along its banks; an additional \$150,000 worth of native plants, shrubbery and trees are set to go along the banks in the coming weeks. A multimillion-dollar restoration of the riverfront park, paid for by the state, is planned.

“Nobody complains now,” said Barbara Diehl, the borough manager.

Mr. Rinscheid, the former borough councilman, said that when he strolls down to the riverfront now, he spots perch and rainbow trout swimming in parts of the river that had been largely fishless for the past half century.

“I’ve had countless people tell me, ‘It’s amazing all the wildlife we’re seeing — I didn’t think taking out those dams would make a difference,’” Mr. Fetterman said. “Now everything can flow freely and clearly, the way that it was intended.”

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