

Willsboro Dam Removal Project (2016)
By Bob McGoldrick,
From A Fisherman's Perspective

There has been much activity at the northern end of the Boquet River in Willsboro this past summer and fall. Bank restoration of the north bank had begun at about the same time as the removal of the Willsboro dam this past August. The restored area extends from about the tail of the main pool below the old dam site to beyond the first island below the main pool, a length of several hundred yards. The previous restoration of the south bank had been done by Georgia Pacific, with workers coming from as far away as Virginia; the current effort had been undertaken by Sheehan and sons, a local excavation company. They also had contracted with the town of Willsboro to take down the dam.

Whereas the dam removal was swift and immediately noticeable the bank restoration had gone through several stages. First a coffer dam had been built to allow for holding back the flow on the north channel of the first island below the main pool. The bank was bolstered with four engineered log jams designed to create a buffer for the banks as well as creating improved fish habitat. The engineered log jams, the first in New York State, jutted out from the bank 8 to 12 feet and consisted of crisscrossed tree trunks anywhere from 2 to 3 feet in diameter. Several willow shoots and other tree seedlings were planted into the bank which was covered with a protective mesh. A log stairway for fishermen was built below the southernmost retaining wall of the old pulp mill and at least one other is scheduled to be put in in the following year. There also will be fishing access for handicapped individuals. The landowner - John Lease III provided a fishing easement along his property to allow public fishing access. Other site improvements are on hold pending additional funds which could come from a brownfield grant to help restore the eroded riverbank to improve accessibility.

One of the major benefits of the dam removal will be the increase in numbers of salmon coming upstream to spawn. Fred Dunlap, DEC, Lake Champlain coordinator, commenting on the dam removal and its impact on the watershed, states "we're very pleased about the results so far. The impact has been minimal. We knew it would change the landscape to some degree, but it hasn't been that severe, particularly where the river used to come up where the old dam used to be". He added that not only did it seem that the dam, which had been deteriorating for a number of years, was taken down just in time but it also would reduce the chances of major flooding especially in the late winter and early spring when ice jams historically had caused much damage in the town of Willsboro.

Mr. Dunlap says that one of the major benefits of the dam removal will be the increase in numbers of salmon coming upstream to spawn. This adds many more miles of open water for the salmon to migrate to appropriate spawning areas both on the main branch and the North branch of the Boquet. He indicated that the ability of the salmon to get up the current grade below the old dam depends on the water flow and the timing of the salmon run in the fall. "This past fall was not ideal because we never got enough rain to allow for a sufficient water flow." He said it might be two or three years before there is enough evidence to gauge the success of the salmon's migration above the old dam.

Mr. Dunlap added the salmon might need some help to get up the cascade section of the river below the old dam site, noting it was very taxing physiologically. "We might have to cut out some sections of bedrock to allow for a resting place for the salmon". Lance Durfey, DEC regional fisheries manager, further elaborated on manmade interventions that might include making artificial channels in places where the water would not be deep enough for the fish to traverse. He said that the current cascades create a sheet flow where the river was very broad and flat; unless there could be deep enough pockets of water for the fish to traverse, they would not be able to get upstream. He stated that this year there had been only a couple of salmon that were known to have made it up to flats above the

old dam site. He added that boards might need to be staked into the bedrock to create deep enough channels for the fish to go through.

Fishermen interviewed (some from as far away as Idaho had come to fish the river and others were just a couple minutes drive from the main pool) at and around the river this fall indicated that the dam removal and its aftermath had not seemed to have affected the fishing quality. In fact, the majority of reports showed that the fishing had been good.

One fisherman from Quebec, Nathan Tremblay, had an outstanding day of fishing, catching 13 salmon up to eight pounds. I noticed he had kept two, one a 26 incher with a small lamprey wound on its underside. (All had been caught a couple of hundred yards below the main pool on salmon egg imitation flies). He said this was the first time that he had been fishing the Boquet this season; he tries to get down to the Boquet several times during the fall run; and had planned to return the following weekend with a friend.

Bob McShane of Willsboro, another fisherman who had a good season, caught a couple of salmon over thirty inches and landed over thirty salmon in all, cited a current concern related to the dam removal. This involved the excessive amount of silt at the tail of the main pool. The silt was up to foot to a foot and a half, covering many of the rocks in the pool. He maintains that this was in part due to the mud and silt building up against the coffer dam that had been installed during the bank restoration on the north bank of the river(it had since been removed at the completion of the project.) Nonetheless he believes that the silt will wash out during the spring flooding. He also felt it might be a couple of years before the effects of the dam removal would be known on how it might have affected the river and the salmon fishing.

Other residents who were not fishermen, had their opinions as well. Mr. Arnie Stoker, a long time Willsboro resident, who lives less than 50 yards from the old dam site, stated that he didn't like the idea of the dam removal at first but when it was taken down it didn't seem to have affected the level of the river as much as some thought it might. He also noted that the river wasn't as loud as he thought it would be after the dam was removed. Nonetheless he felt strongly that local input was not given enough consideration and a new dam should have been put in to replace the old one.

Two brothers, Ron and Bob Shambo, who had lived in Willsboro many years ago had returned to visit the site of the old dam as well as to look at the recently restored north bank. They were both especially pleased with the results of the bank restoration. Bob pointed to the not yet restored upper section of the north bank where the old paper mill used to be and recalled that the mill was a major employer of the town 70 years ago. At that time both their father and uncle worked there. One of the perks of the job was that employees could catch fish to supplement their income on their lunch hour. He pointed to a spot where there used to be a utility room that covered an expanse of water that ran down the rocky ledge and in it were conveniently placed spears where employees and enterprising youngsters such as he and his brother would spear bass resting in the eddies. He acknowledged that this would probably not meet current sport fishing or labor regulations, but then again it was a different era.

Gary Chilson of Elizabethtown noted that there had not been as much silt as he had thought and wondered if a lot of it had already seeped through the old dam which already had numerous leaks. He surmised that the dam removal would allow for far reaching migration of salmon up the main stem and the north branch of the Boquet; he felt if the culverts in the Boquet and adjoining streams were added or improved in upcoming years the extent of the migration could go even further. On the whole, those who were interviewed, allowed that the dam removal and the bank restoration has been a success. It remains to be seen what the long-term effects of the dam removal will be and how the bank will hold up.