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Heilman Dam removal restores 18 miles of historic fish habitat

Lehigh, Pa. —American shad, herring and other migratory fish will soon be able to reach 18 miles of their historic habitat in the Lehigh River Watershed. The Heilman Dam will be removed -- beginning today -- and will enable these fish to travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the headwaters of Mahoning Creek in Carbon and Schuylkill counties, a journey of more than 250 miles

NOAA's Community-based Restoration Program provided technical assistance, oversight, and feasibility and assessment funds for the river restoration project. "This project shows our commitment to citizen-driven restoration initiatives, and we are proud to have joined our federal and local partners on such a successful restoration of habitat," said William T. Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. "Removing the Heilman Dam will improve community safety and help restore populations of American shad, herring and other migratory fish to the river."

NOAA's CRP, a financial and technical assistance program with the NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation, promotes strong partnerships at the national, regional and local level to fund grassroots, community-based restoration projects. Since its inception in 1996, CRP and its partners have funded more than 1,500 restoration projects nationally, including 350 in the Northeast.

The Heilman Dam, a 15-foot high concrete structure owned by the Borough of Lehigh, once provided water for steam-fired locomotives but no longer serves a purpose. The borough considers the deteriorated dam a public safety hazard and a liability, not worthy of investing taxpayer dollars to repair and maintain for the long-term.

"It was a no-brainer, really. Removing the dam is the most logical decision for economic and public safety reasons. Plus, it restores Mahoning Creek to its natural state and allows us to create a safe riverside park for our community," said John Hanosek, Lehigh Borough Manager. "We're looking forward to seeing shad swimming past the park, and we thank our partners for helping make this happen," he added.

Heilman Dam will be removed using a hydraulic hammer mounted on an excavator. Banks of the restored stream channel will be planted with native grasses, various shrubs and tree seedlings. The project will enable about 3 acres of land to be used as a riverside public park. The borough's long-term plan is to improve access to the site and increase boating and fishing of Mahoning Creek.

The creek is currently designated a Cold Water Fishery and portions are stocked with trout by the PA Fish and Boat Commission. Removal of the dam, and resulting water quality improvements, will increase the length of creek that is available habitat for trout.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for the people of Lehigh. Not only will they soon experience the joy of a free-flowing and healthier Mahoning Creek. The park will reconnect the community to their home waters, and the local economy may see benefits from increased river-based recreation,” said Rebecca Wodder, President of American Rivers, a national organization providing project funding.

The Lehigh River and major tributaries such as Mahoning Creek once had significant runs of American shad and other migratory fish species, including alewife, blueback herring and American eel. The Delaware River Basin Commission considers the Lehigh River Watershed to be one of the three most important tributaries to the Delaware River for restoring the American shad.

The entire project is expected to cost \$120,000. Financial and technical assistance for the project has been provided by the NOAA Restoration Center, American Rivers, FishAmerica Foundation, PA Department of Environmental Protection’s Growing Greener Grant Program, PA Fish and Boat Commission, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is celebrating 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Commission of Fish and Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America’s scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

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