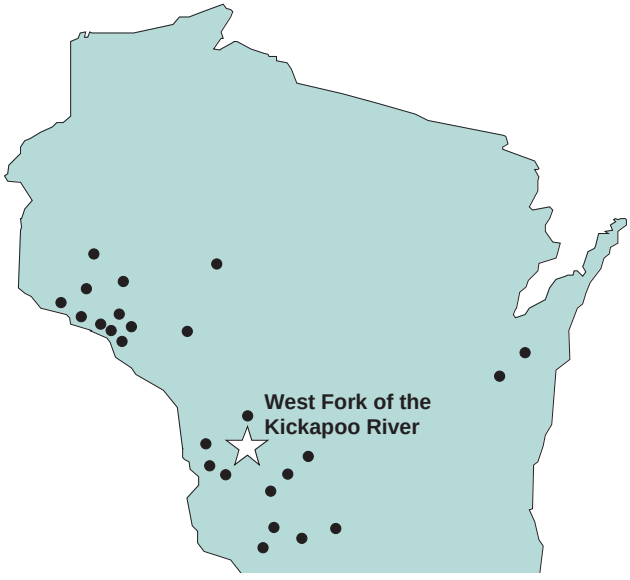
The Case for Reinvesting in the West Fork of The Kickapoo Watershed

The Situation: Dams built in Western Wisconsin over the past 40 years are deteriorating.

Throughout the dust bowl era and through the 1950s, rains in western Wisconsin washed soil from the steep hillsides into streams, clogging them with sediment and flooding farms and towns. Trout, and even warm water fish were practically non-existent in the main streams or tributaries.

Flood control structures and conservation practices built by the Natural Resources Conservation Service helped turn this situation around. Contour strip cropping, crop rotations and conversion of steep slopes into pasture or woodland were used to prevent upland erosion and reduce stream siltation; and dams were built to control flooding.

Today, many of these aging structures are in danger of failing as they reach the end of their useful life. Benefits now taken for granted could be lost as well as opportunities to grow through recreation and tourism .



The West Fork of the Kickapoo River is one of 26 PL-566 watershed projects in Wisconsin. Eighty-three flood control dams were built throughout these watersheds using a unique approach to watershed management and partnering. However, many of these dams will reach the end of their useful life within 15 years.

Project Description

- **Size:** 64,170 acres (100.2 square miles)
- **Number of dams:** 9
- **Project start:** In 1956, the USDA Soil Conservation Service (now Natural Resources Conservation Service) designed and paid for the dams and provided staff to work with landowners
- **Project end:** 1971. Maintenance and operation are now the responsibility of project sponsor, Vernon County.
- **Primary purposes:** Flood prevention, conservation treatment and recreation
- **People served:** 11,700 annually.

Partners:

- Vernon County Land Conservation Committee
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
- West Clinton Watershed Association
- Wisconsin Soil and Water Conservation Committee
- Vernon County Board
- United States Department of Agriculture - Natural Resources Conservation Service

"The presence of [the dams] here has been extremely valuable. Because of the dams we can reduce the design size of bridges and culverts. [Also], the very evident flood control and erosion reduction from the reduced flows have been very worthy in protecting the counties' highways."

Virgil Hanold
Vernon County Highway Commissioner

"Since the installation of the PL-566 structures here on the West Fork of the Kickapoo the flooding has been greatly reduced. Flood reduction has allowed the once degraded floodway to begin the process of healing. Trout habitat structures and stream modifications are now more practical since the main destroyer of such projects was flooding."

Roger Widner, President
West Fork Kickapoo Sports Club

Why We Need to Reinvest in the West Fork of the Kickapoo Watershed Project:

Through Public Law 566, Congress invested over $1.1million in construction of 9 dams in the West Fork of the Kickapoo River Watershed. For their part, the local sponsors and landowners matched funds, purchased land, installed soil conservation practices, built recreational facilities, and operated and maintained the structures. Many of the benefits of this project include:

- 30 miles of once degraded waters are now Class I trout streams because of upland treatment and flood control. All the streams lack now is instream habitat structures.
- 24,411 acres protected from flooding
- 15 miles of roads and 26 bridges are safer and require fewer repairs from flooding.
- 6,700 tons of soil are kept in place and 700 tons of soil are prevented from eroding into streams every year.
- Water-based recreation and the revenue it generates have increased in the area of the state where there are no natural lakes. West Fork Dam #01, with its 54 acre lake, is considered one of the area's recreation jewels
- Nearly $500,000 each year are being returned to the area from non-local trout anglers in the West Fork of the Kickapoo.

The Kickapoo River Valley is an economically distressed area whose rich natural amenities could serve as a foundation for eco-tourism. Scattered successes in the watershed have been a result of the investments of organizations like Trout Unlimited, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, local sportsman's clubs, and others building upon the work done through PL-566. To continue to reap these benefits, the integrity of the dams needs to be maintained. We have a rare opportunity to take advantage of the existing dams to improve the local economy and resources by increasing trout numbers through instream habitat structures.

Trout habitat structures are installed to create fish habitat.

The economics of installing lunkers (trout habitat structures) is very encouraging. It is estimated that installation of lunkers on the 30 miles of waters in the watershed would return a recreational value of $5 for every dollar spent. Nationwide publicity has already attracted hundreds of out-of-state anglers to this watershed. However, without additional habitat improvements, the fishing pressure could soon overcome the existing fish population.

"...Such an effort could help sustain and insure success of the community-based watershed protection and restoration initiative."

Steve Born
Chair, Trout Unlimited National Resources Board

Statewide Perspective

There is a cost to not protecting this investment that cannot be overlooked. Communities and individuals today are protected by the dams and enjoy the economic and recreational benefits of their grandparent's investment. These dams have aged and deteriorated to the point where costly replacement looms as a major infrastructure debt for rural, economically depressed counties.

These 83 dams have become part of Wisconsin's natural landscape through the PL-566 program. Many are approaching their expected 50-year lifespan.Without proper upgrading, western Wisconsin is missing out on opportunities for small communities to grow and prosper.

"The PL-566 program has been tremendously successful...Sponsors would look forward to rekindling the close relationship with NRCS."

Phil Hahn
Chair, Wisconsin PL-566 Coalition