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Conservation Success Story

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NRCS Provides Financial and Technical Assistance to Remove Pawtuxet Falls Dam Allowing Migratory Fish Such As River Herring and American Shad to Migrate Upstream to Spawn for the First Time in Over 100 Years

WARWICK, RI (October 7, 2011) – In August 2011, the waters of the Pawtuxet River rushed over the natural bedrock falls at the river’s mouth, entering salty Narragansett Bay unimpeded for the first time in well over 100 years. The restoration of the free-flowing river was the result of the largest ecological dam removal project yet undertaken in Rhode Island. The project was led by the Pawtuxet River Authority and Narragansett Bay Estuary Program with funding and technical assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) along with more than a dozen Federal, State and private organizations.



The Pawtuxet River Falls prior to the dam removal (left) and during the dam removal where excavators remove the concrete spillway (right).

NRCS provided financial and technical support for the project under the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) whose purpose is to implement conservation practices that create, restore, or enhance fish and wildlife habitat. NRCS invested over \$500,000 towards planning, design, and construction of the project including construction costs for dam removal and planting native wetland plants and trees along the Pawtuxet River. The purpose of the project is to improve the ecosystems of the Pawtuxet River watershed and Narragansett Bay by restoring populations of native migratory fish, such as river herring and American shad, which have been blocked from fully accessing their natural spawning habitat for hundreds of years. Herring and shad are important components of marine and freshwater ecosystems, providing abundant food for bluefish, striped bass, and largemouth bass which are integral part of Rhode Island’s \$200 million fishing industry. In addition, the dam removal will provide modest flood reduction for homes and businesses and improve water quality in the lower Pawtuxet River.



The removal of the spillway required excavators fitted with hydraulic hammers to break up 150 feet of concrete (left) and Pawtuxet Falls after the dam removal (right).

Throughout August, contractors used excavators fitted with hydraulic hammers to break up the 150 foot concrete spillway of Pawtuxet Falls Dam, removing it from the river as rubble. The concrete dam was built in 1924, replacing an earlier timber dam. The project restored seven miles of free-flowing river habitat to one of the State's largest and most historic rivers and reduced the depth of the river by two to three feet along its lower reach. Where new riverbanks were exposed by the restoration, NRCS provided funding to install native wetland plants and trees to speed the process of natural recovery which will be completed this fall.



State Conservationist R. Phou Vongkhamdy speaks at the Pawtuxet River Restoration Commemoration where several dignitaries attended the event.

It is estimated that more than 100,000 herring and shad will return to the Pawtuxet River annually starting next spring. Fish will naturally find their way upstream once the dam is removed. River herring and American shad were once highly abundant in Rhode Island's rivers, an important component of the marine food web and the basis of a large fishery. Beginning in the 1700s, however, more than 600 dams were built in Rhode Island to provide water power for the mills of the Industrial Revolution. The dams blocked access to historic spawning habitat for fish and led to a precipitous decline in their numbers.

The construction and planting phases cost approximately \$600,000, funded primarily by NRCS with the remaining funds provided by the R.I. Department of Environmental Management under the Narragansett Bay and Watershed Restoration Bond Fund along with a number of other Federal, State and private programs including the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council. In developing the restoration project, major engineering, environmental and cultural studies of the Pawtuxet River were completed including an examination of river flow, sediments, wetlands, and historic resources in order to ensure that the dam removal will improve the environment of the Pawtuxet River and Narragansett Bay while avoiding adverse impacts to human health or economic uses. In order to begin construction, extensive permitting was necessary including



Canoeists and kayakers paddle down the Pawtuxet River.

approvals by the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

To view videos highlighting the dam removal and restoration celebration, please select the following links:

[Pawtuxet Falls Dam Removal Video on You Tube](#)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhtVrJrDook>

[Pawtuxet Falls Dam Removal Video on NBC Channel 10](#)

<http://video.turnto10.com/v/43940340/pawtuxet-dam-removal.htm?q=pawtuxet+river+fish+passage>

[Pawtuxet River Restoration Commemoration Video on NBC Channel 10](#)

<http://www2.turnto10.com/news/2011/sep/30/recreation-returns-river-pawtuxet-village-ar-765121/>