

Natural. Valued. Protected.

A Landowner's Guide to Removing Small Dams in Ontario

Many small dams in Ontario were built long ago and no longer serve a useful purpose today. In some cases the cost of maintenance or replacement makes the dam no longer practical. If you own a dam like this, you may decide you would like to remove it, either partly or completely, as have many other dam owners in Ontario and Canada.

What is a dam?

In Ontario, the Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act defines a dam as “a structure or work forwarding, holding back or diverting water.” Approval is required to “decommission” a dam. Decommissioning means full or partial removal or lowering the height of a dam. This act does not apply to federally owned dams.

Why should you consider removing a dam?

Safety

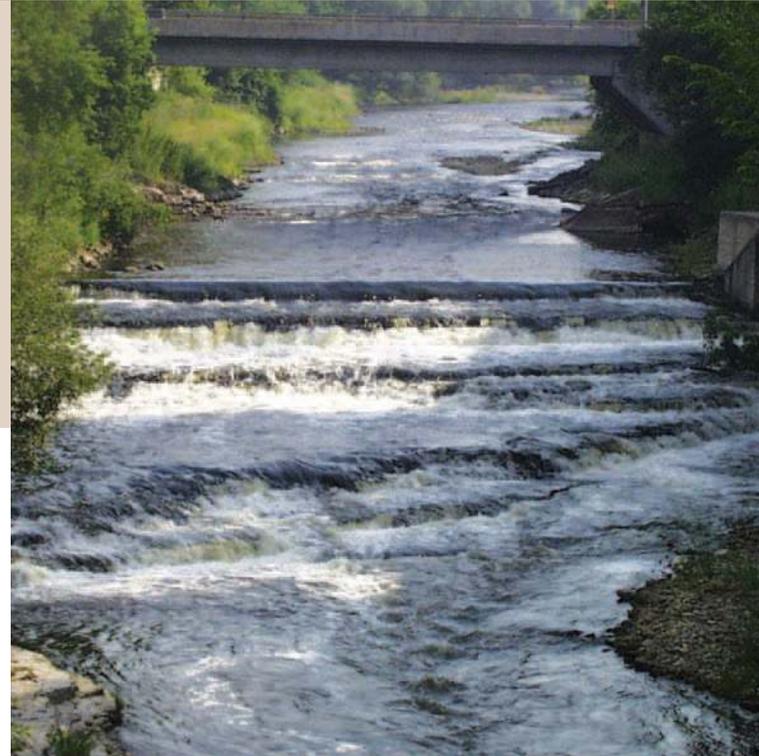
To protect the safety of the public. The sudden failure of a dam may result in injuries or even loss of life.

To prevent property damage. If a dam is very old or has not been properly maintained, it may suddenly fail and cause damage to your property, to downstream landowners or to public roads, bridges or utilities.

Economic

To eliminate maintenance costs. If you are paying to keep an unnecessary dam in good repair, you can save that expense by removing the dam.

To avoid future liability. If a dam fails, the owner may be liable for any resulting injury, death or property and environmental damage.



Beatty Dam, Grand River – After dam removal

Environmental

To create a healthier fishery. Depending on the type of fish in the stream, it may be impossible for them to swim around the dam to reach their traditional spawning grounds. A shallow headpond may not offer suitable habitat for some fish species.

To improve the water quality. A shallow headpond may be the result of accumulated sediments. Removing the dam will restore the natural flushing action of the river or stream.

Societal

Recreational and aesthetic benefits. After a dam has been removed, the natural shoreline will gradually be re-established. The naturalized shoreline will create other outdoor and recreational opportunities.

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Approvals required

It is the responsibility of the dam owner to obtain any necessary approvals before partially or completely removing a dam.

If you wish to remove all or part of any dam in Ontario, you will need permission from the Ministry of Natural Resources. In some cases, you may also need approval from one or more of the following:

- Fisheries and Oceans Canada
- Transport Canada
- Your local Conservation Authority
- Ontario Ministry of the Environment
- Ontario Ministry of Culture
- Your municipality

The Ministry of Natural Resources can provide guidance to help you through the approval process. However, it is often more beneficial to hire a consultant who can compile all the detailed information you will need to submit when you apply for approval.

The removal process

If you are considering removing your dam, you will need to do the following:

- **Understand:** Evaluate the usefulness of the dam, its condition and its effect on the habitat value of the stream or river and on nearby land.
- **Plan:** Be clear about what you hope to achieve by removing the dam. Talk to neighbouring landowners, local residents or parties that might be affected by the removal of the dam.
- **Assess your Plan:** Determine the problems that you might expect during dam removal and that might be caused by removing the dam. Adapt your plan to address such issues as timing, sediment control measures, disposal of material, stabilization of banks and others.
- **Get Approval:** Contact your District Office of the Ministry of Natural Resources and the other agencies listed above to determine if their approval is required. Your Ministry of Natural Resources Office will advise you if any other agencies need to be consulted.
- **Communicate:** Let people know of your definite plans, including time and date, before starting work.
- **Remove the Dam:** Choose a qualified and experienced contractor to do the work.

- **Monitor:** After the dam has been removed, monitor the site and observe the changes that have taken place. Habitat and environmental changes may occur slowly.



Cawthra Mullock Dam (West Holland River) – Before



Cawthra Mullock Dam – After

Not all dams should be removed

Some dams may still provide important benefits such as hydropower production. The headpond may cover underwater works such as water lines and utility cables. It may also provide fish and wildlife habitat for endangered species as well as recreation benefits. The dam may act as a barrier to the movement of sediment downstream or of undesirable or exotic species of fish upstream.

If you decide not to remove your dam, you need to continue to inspect it regularly and make necessary repairs.

For more information on this subject, please contact your local Ministry of Natural Resources District Office.

This fact sheet is also available at: ontario.ca/dams