



## BREAKING NEWS

**For Immediate Release:** Friday, July 19, 2013

### CONTACTS:

Misty Edgecomb, The Nature Conservancy, [medgecomb@tnc.org](mailto:medgecomb@tnc.org), 484-343-3223

Brian Graber, American Rivers, [bgraber@americanrivers.org](mailto:bgraber@americanrivers.org), 413-588-8251

Peter Hanney, Save The Bay, [phanney@savebay.org](mailto:phanney@savebay.org) (401) 272-3540 x 129

Maggie Mooney-Seus, NOAA, [Marjorie.Mooney-Seus@noaa.gov](mailto:Marjorie.Mooney-Seus@noaa.gov), 774-392-4865

Hunt Durey, Massachusetts Department of Fish & Game, [hunt.durey@state.ma.us](mailto:hunt.durey@state.ma.us), 617-626-1245

## Whittenton Dam Removal Begins in Taunton

*Mill River Dams Being Removed to Benefit Public Safety, River Ecology*

**TAUNTON, MA** – Eight years after a near-tragedy brought public attention to this dilapidated structure, the Whittenton Dam is being removed, both to ensure public safety and to restore the ecological health of the Mill River.

“River restoration pays off for fish and people. Last year, the Hopewell Mills Dam was removed from the Mill River, an ecologically important tributary to the federally-designated Wild and Scenic Taunton River,” said Mary Griffin, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game.

“Now, with the removal of Whittenton Dam, we eliminate a long-time public safety threat and continue the important work to restore the habitat of the Mill River and Taunton River watershed,” Griffin said.

In 2005, [this dam made national news](#), when a portion of downtown Taunton was evacuated and a state of emergency declared, following heavy rains. Thousands of people were driven from their homes, with schools and businesses closed for several days, after the 170-year old wooden Whittenton Dam buckled and threatened to send a four-foot wall of water through this city.

The incident brought the risks posed by Massachusetts’ 3,000 dams into sharp relief. Most of the Commonwealth’s dams are more than a century old, and many long-obsolete dams have fallen into disrepair. Just 10 percent of the state’s dams still provide energy, drinking water or flood control.

The Whittenton event prompted state leaders to action – first with a statewide effort to better document the safety of various structures – then, in late 2012, with [state legislation that provided funding for dam removal and repair efforts](#).

A partnership of nonprofit groups and state and federal agencies has brought about the Mill River Restoration, a project that includes the removal of three dams and the instillation of a fishway at a fourth dam on this important Taunton River tributary, allowing migratory species

like river herring and American eel to access an additional 30 miles of river habitat as well as upstream lakes and ponds. Whittenton Dam is the second dam to be removed as a part of this project, but it is the most deteriorated, and has, in fact, become representative of the problem with aging, dangerous dams.

"I am pleased to see that the crumbling Whittenton Dam will soon be removed after years of work on this important issue, and I want to thank the leaders from the Department of Fish and Game, The Nature Conservancy, Save The Bay, the National Oceans and Atmospheric Administration and American Rivers for getting it done," said Senator Marc R. Pacheco, who chairs the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture and authored the bill last legislative session promoting dam safety, repair and removal.

"The dam, as it sits, poses safety hazards to the public and environmental problems to the surrounding ecosystem. Freeing up the Taunton River from this deteriorating structure will protect our citizens, save them from footing expensive repairs, and promote biodiversity," Pacheco said.

The 2005 crisis prompted the formation of the Mill River Restoration partnership that has led the dam removal project, as well as legislative efforts to make the removal and repair of aging dams easier for Massachusetts communities.

[Last summer and fall, the Hopewell Mills Dam](#), located just downstream from the Whittenton Dam, was removed and already, sea-run fish like river herring, are returning to the watershed.

"The Taunton has long been home to one of New England's richest fish runs, and removing this barrier will allow the river to provide habitat, flood control and other benefits that will serve nature as well as local people," said Alison Bowden, director of freshwater conservation at The Nature Conservancy.

This spring, the first river herring in nearly 200 years was spotted upstream of the former Hopewell Mills dam site, making its way from Narragansett Bay to inland spawning areas. Sea-run fish play a major role in the ecology of the bay, and restoring the connections between these saltwater and freshwater ecosystems will bring benefits throughout the region.

"The health of Narragansett Bay depends on the health of our major tributaries. Restoring habitat for fish in the Mill River watershed will benefit predator species and improve recreational fishing in the Bay," said Rachel Calabro, Community Advocate at Save The Bay.

The Taunton is one of the only free-flowing rivers in New England, and restoring fish passage to a major tributary like the Mill River will have great significance for the river's famed herring run, which is already one of the largest in the region. Many more fish will then return to Narragansett Bay, where they will feed the groundfish that are so critical to New England's commercial fishing industry and culture.

"The Mill River has the potential to support one of the larger river herring runs in the state," said John Catena, Regional Supervisor for NOAA's Restoration Center. "Removing Whittenton Dam

gets us one step closer to increasing these forage fish, and that means the possibility of more fish like cod, striped bass, and tuna in the coastal waters of New England.”

With the Hopewell Mills Dam gone, a fishway installed at Morey’s Bridge and Whittenton Dam scheduled to be removed by fall, the Mill River Restoration partnership plans to remove one more final dam from the Mill River next year, to complete the restoration of passage for native river herring and American eel to the Canoe River, Snake River, Lake Sabbatia and Winnecunnet Pond. This successful collaboration exemplifies many similar dam removal efforts taking place throughout the Commonwealth, New England, and the nation.

“Eight years ago, the Whittenton Dam helped to cast a spotlight on the decaying condition of so many of the nation’s dams. Removing this dam is the most effective way to ensure it will never be a safety hazard again. This site is once again serving as a national example, this time showing that dam removals can benefit both river health and public safety,” said Brian Graber, Acting Senior Director of River Restoration for American Rivers.

***Photographs are available and reporters are welcome to visit the site. For interviews or site access, please contact the partners listed above.***

For more information about the Mill River Restoration Partnership:

- <http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/massachusetts/explore/ma-rivers-run-free.xml>
- <http://www.americanrivers.org/newsroom/blog/bgraber-20130226-river-impossible-the-hazard-of-whittenton-dam-mill-river-restoration.html>

###

***The Mill River Restoration Partnership*** includes dam owners, Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, MA Division of Ecological Restoration, NOAA-Restoration Center, The Nature Conservancy, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Save The Bay, American Rivers, US Fish and Wildlife Service, MA Division of Marine Fisheries, MA Department of Transportation, Massachusetts Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership, Mass Audubon, Taunton River Watershed Alliance, and the Massachusetts Environmental Trust.