

## 2-15-05 SUBMISSION TO “YOUR WORLD” COLUMN, ANN ARBOR NEWS

According to former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, on average, we have constructed one dam every day in the U.S. since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. But now the trend is reversing. At least 465 dams have been removed from our nation's waterways, and at least 100 more are on their way.

Michigan has approximately 2,500 dams. With about a dozen removal projects in place, more are sure to follow. The average life expectancy of a dam is 50 years, and a full one-quarter of all U.S. dams are now more than 50 years old. By the year 2020 that figure will reach 85 percent ([www.americanrivers.org](http://www.americanrivers.org)).

Contrary to popular belief, most of our aging dams do not produce power. Of the 77,000 dams greater than 6 feet high across the country, fewer than 2,500 generate electricity. Most were built for purposes such as running now obsolete mills, controlling floods, and creating water supplies or recreational lakes.

In many communities, the costs of repairing the dams are greater than the benefits received. And there is a growing awareness of the ecological downside of dams: They prevent the movement of fish along the waterway. The sediment they collect covers the gravelly river-bottom, which is required for spawning. They reduce oxygen in the water, and change the temperature. These factors make it hard or impossible for many aquatic species to live.

The Huron River watershed has about 100 dams. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources has suggested three of them for removal potential: the Peninsular Paper Dam in Ypsilanti, the Mill Pond Dam in Dexter, and Argo Dam in Ann Arbor.

It is up to each community to weigh the pros and cons of potential removal projects. For instance, a barrier to dam removal can be encountered if the sediment built up behind the dam is found to contain hazardous toxins, escalating removal costs. Luckily, this is not the case for the Mill Pond Dam in Dexter, or Argo Dam in Ann Arbor.

A community task force and the Dexter Village Trustees recommended removal of their Mill Pond Dam. The dam is connected to a bridge which is slated to be improved beginning this spring, along with the road under it. The hope is that the dam removal can be funded and completed at the same time.

A consensus does not exist concerning the Argo Dam. The dam no longer provides hydropower nor flood control, and the U.S. Geological Survey has identified it as the dam in Michigan that most dramatically alters the natural stream hydrology of its host river. But opposition to its removal comes from row teams, who cite a lack of nearby alternatives.

For more on potential dam removals in our area, see the Huron River Watershed Council's report entitled, “Case Studies in River Restoration Through Dam Removal,” at [www.hrwc.org](http://www.hrwc.org).

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