Blockages gone, fish back in post-Sandy projects in 6 states

November 25 2018, by Wayne Parry

In this May 4, 2015, file photo, Jenna Krug, a restoration coordinator with the American Littoral Society environmental group, holds a white sucker that her group caught in a net at Wreck Pond in Spring Lake, N.J. Billions of dollars have been spent on the recovery from Superstorm Sandy to help people get their lives back together, but a little-noticed portion of that effort is quietly helping another population along the shoreline: fish that need to migrate from coastal rivers out to the sea and back. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry, File)

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After the 2012 storm, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spent nearly $11 million on a series of projects to remove dams and other blockages from coastal waters in six states, partnering with local environmental groups. Fish species that were scarce or entirely absent from those waterways for years soon began showing up again.

The so-called "aquatic connectivity" projects in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia were part of a $105 million effort not only to fix what was damaged by Sandy, but also to improve environmental conditions in places where recreational benefits could help tourism and the economy, as well. While the storm did its worst damage in New York and New Jersey, its effects were felt in many states along the East Coast.

"The idea was not only to do good things for fish and wildlife, but to provide community benefits and make communities more resilient," said Rick Bennett, a scientist with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Massachusetts. "By removing dams, you also reduce flooding, especially upstream."

Aquatic species benefiting from the work include the Eastern Brook trout, sea run brown trout, sea lamprey, American eel and river herring.

One of the first and most successful projects happened in Spring Lake, New Jersey's Wreck Pond. For years, the conflicting goals of protecting the environment and some of the New Jersey shore's priciest real estate from storms have bedeviled the pond.

Storms sometimes open a channel between the 48-acre tidal pond and the ocean, but governments keep sealing it shut to protect homes from flooding. The result was poor water quality and much narrower access to the ocean, which hurts fish that travel from ocean to pond to breed.

In this May 4, 2015, file photo, Pim Van Hemmen, left, and Al Modjeski, right, of the American Littoral Society environmental group, stretch large fish nets under a railroad overpass at Wreck Pond in Spring Lake, N.J. Billions of dollars have been spent on the recovery from Superstorm Sandy to help people get their lives back together, but a little-noticed portion of that effort is quietly helping another population along the shoreline: fish that need to migrate from coastal rivers out to the sea and back. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry, File)

The American Littoral Society oversaw construction of a concrete

culvert between the pond and the ocean to make it easier for fish, including herring, to reach the sea. In addition to letting fish in and out more easily, the culvert can be opened or closed as needed during storms to control flooding.

It succeeded at both goals, said Tim Dillingham, the group's executive director.

"The restoration of connectivity to allow fish to return and spawn has been a great success," he said. "We're seeing fish come back in numbers we hadn't seen before. And it has also added to the resiliency of the area during storms, by adding capacity to deal with flooding."

Other similar work includes:

— The 2016 removal of the Hughesville Dam on the Musconetcong River in New Jersey. In just a few months, an American shad was found upstream of the former dam site, which environmental officials say could be the first to make it that far since the dam was built in 1889.

— The removal from 2013 to 2018 of the West Britannia Dam in Taunton, Massachusetts. Within months, an underwater camera spotted a river herring using the fish ladder at Lake Sabbatia, the first one of its species to enter the lake in 200 years, the wildlife service said. Before spawning season was done, at least 1,200 herring swam through.

— Removal of 10 dams in Rhode Island and Connecticut that helped restore fish populations to the Pawcatuck, West and Jeremy rivers, and the Whitford Brook, allowing fish species including alewives to return in greater numbers.

In this May 4, 2015, file photo, Jenna Krug, left, brings equipment to Pim Van Hemmen, center, and Al Modjeski, right, of the American Littoral Society environmental group as they place large nets in Wreck Pond at Spring Lake, N.J. Billions of dollars have been spent on the recovery from Superstorm Sandy to help people get their lives back together, but a little-noticed portion of that effort is quietly helping another population along the shoreline: fish that need to migrate from coastal rivers out to the sea and back. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry, File)

— The removal of the Centreville (2015) and Bloede dams (started in September 2018) along the Corsica and Patapsco rivers Maryland to help the movement of eel and river herring, and reduce flooding.

— The 2016 restoration of part of Dewey's Creek in Dumfries, Virginia, that became clogged with sediment during Sandy.

Two other dam removal projects on the Coonamessett River in Falmouth, Massachusetts, and the Chester River in Millington, Maryland, are just getting underway.

The feds will monitor conditions and the resulting benefits to communities for the next five years.