# Upstream battle: Bishopville dam removal a success

Rachael Pacella, DelmarvaNow 2:25 p.m. EDT April 19, 2015

## The goal of the project was to open 7 miles of waterway to fish that move from salt water to fresh water to spawn.



(Photo: Staff photo by Joe Lamberti)

Roman Jesien's trophy fish was a little less than 10 inches long.

He found it at the top of the fish passage that has replaced the Bishopville dam.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other organizations told him that tearing down the dam and replacing it wouldn't work, that it wouldn't bring fish, blocked from spawning ground for 56 years by a metal wall, back to the area.

"It took us 10 years to put it together, primarily because a lot of folks didn't believe in it," Jesien, of Maryland Coastal Bays, said.

The goal of the project was to open 7 miles of waterway to fish that move from salt water to fresh water to spawn. The alewife caught in a trap at the top of the fish passage April 15 proved that was possible.

"I didn't anticipate that it would happen so quickly," Jesien said.

Construction on the project began last fall, and still isn't fully complete.

Amanda Poskaitis, who helped retrieve the alewife from a trap along with Jennifer Rafter, said Rafter didn't believe her at first when she identified the fish.

"I was like 'That's an alewife!' And she was like 'No it's not,' she didn't believe it, and I was like, 'No! Look at it!' and she was like, 'Oh my God!'

"Poskaitis said. "It was a beautiful morning."

Alewife, a species of concern, run in groups, Poskaitis said, so it's likely that more than one got into the pond. Maryland Coastal Bays has also caught a white perch, another fish that moves from salt water to fresh water.

Reaching spawning ground will ideally grow the population of those species.

"A lot of fish species are being overfished, and there are so many dams blocking where they need to go to make more fish," she said.

Poskaitis toured the site April 15, explaining exactly how the fish passage works. The project was designed by Keith Underwood of Underwood and Associates, an ecological restoration designer, and provides gradual steps for fish to move upstream.

Crossing a bridge on Bishopville Road, a well-traveled corridor, it's easy to see the different components of the project — wood and stones form four weirs, the steps of the fish passage. Room between the weirs is left for fish to rest before making the next climb.

One of the concerns for pollution downstream from disrupting the bed of the pond, which was mucky and filled with heavy metal, Poskaitis said.

"(Underwood) was able to trap toxic mud filled with heavy metals under all this sand and rock successfully," she said.



Amanda Poskaitis of Maryland Coastal Bays prepares a net at the project site Bishopville. (Photo: Staff photo by Joe Lamberti)

The project hasn't impacted the turbidity, or clearness, of the water downstream — the mud has stayed in place. The added movement of the water over the weirs also creates more dissolved oxygen for fish to breathe, Poskaitis said.

Maryland Coastal Bays and volunteers have planted hundreds of trees on the ground surrounding the passage, but there are also some dead trunks scattered about.

"All this wood that you see, they put it in there to provide habitat," she said. "It might help take out nitrogen over time."

It does that by creating denitrifying bacteria, she said. If nothing else, it creates a good stream bed.

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources helped provide funding and support for the $1.4 million project. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also provided funding.

One more weir will be built downstream but will utilize different funding, she said. The only piece of the puzzle left is planting even more Atlantic white cedar and pitch pine to help stabilize the project.

Scientists with Maryland Coastal Bays, like Poskaitis, will continue sampling fish in the area for the next five years, checking on the project's progress. But Poskaitis doesn't mind.

"I love this place," she said.