

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Dillsboro Dam Removal

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

As a small crowd watched, a hydraulic hammer recently knocked away the first chunk of stone and concrete from Dillsboro Dam. Within weeks, the entire 12-foot high dam will be gone.

It's one of a series of Duke Energy hydropower facilities on western North Carolina's Tuckasegee River. Federal law requires operators of private hydropower dams to address impacts to fish and wildlife. Duke Energy's decision to remove the dam is seen as a major part of that effort on the Tuckasegee River.

The endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel is found both above and below the dam, and removal will help reconnect the bisected population. Dam removal will provide access to upstream habitat to the sicklefin redhorse. This migratory fish is found in the lower reaches of the Tuckasegee River and is the focus of efforts to boost its numbers, including creating a population that will swim into habitat made available by dam removal.

For the past century, nearly a mile of the river has sat impounded behind Dillsboro Dam. The biological impact of the reservoir can be seen in the fact the elktoe is found above and below, but not in the reservoir, and biologists found 11 species of fish in the reservoir, while the river immediately below held 38 and the river stretch above had 24. Restoring the reservoir to a free-flowing river will make this reach usable to a suite of native fish and other aquatic animals.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.