The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/21/us/missouri-man-dam-dead.html

Missouri Man Dies in Dam's Hydraulics While Trying to Save Trapped Boater

The man jumped into the water to help a boater who had become trapped in the powerful, washing machine-like waters at the base of the dam.

Listen to this article · 1:53 min Learn more

By Alexandra E. Petri

Published July 21, 2025 Updated July 22, 2025, 10:12 a.m. ET

A Missouri man who jumped into a river to help a boater stranded in a dam died on Sunday after becoming trapped by the dam's hydraulics, the authorities said.

The man, 54, was pronounced dead at a hospital Sunday evening, the Missouri State Highway Patrol said in an incident report.

Emergency responders were dispatched to a water rescue of two people in the Elk River, near Noel, Mo., at the southwest corner of the state, at around 5:35 p.m. on Sunday, the agency said in its report. One of the people had gone over a low-head dam in the river.

According to the incident report, the man jumped into the water above the dam to help a boater who had become trapped in the powerful, washing machine-like waters at the base of the dam called the hydraulics. The man, whose name was not released, was then swept up by the current and pulled through the hydraulics, the agency said.

He resurfaced downstream, where a bystander pulled him to safety, and emergency responders administered first aid.

The man was transported to Ozarks Community Hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The boater was uninjured, the highway patrol said.

Lowhead dams are man-made structures that span waterways and allow water to continuously flow overtop, according to the environmental group American Rivers. They are sometimes referred to as "drowning machines" because they can create a recirculating roller-like current at the base of the dam, which can trap people, boats or other objects, and make it nearly impossible to escape.

About 50 fatalities typically occur each year at low-head dams across the United States, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers.