

*Free-Flowing Pennsylvania I: MU 30067 Project Number 4100021075  
American Rivers, Final Report March 2007*

**Project Title:** Sharrer's Mill dam removal and habitat restoration

Project Location Conewago Creek, near New Oxford, PA; Adams Co.

Latitude 39.906321

Longitude -77.100712

Dam removed Sharrer's Mill dam, DEP No. 01-043

Date of removal February 2006

Linear feet restored 11,510 feet riparian habitat (2.18 miles); 5,755 feet instream habitat

Stream miles opened 4.5 miles

Species to benefit warmwater species, migratory species (future)

**Project Costs:**

Growing Greener contribution \$21,100 toward design/engineering

Federal contribution \$75,000 toward implementation

State contribution \$1,000

Private contribution \$0

**Project Overview:**

The Sharrer's Mill dam was built to power a grist mill. It was no longer used for its original purpose and the owners wished to restore the natural ecosystem on Conewago Creek. The dam was removed in February 2006 and built upon the June 2004 removal of the Detter's Mill dam downstream on Conewago Creek, which opened 10 miles for fish passage in York County. The dam owners were very appreciate of the support of American River's DEP Growing Greener award and the partnership of agencies and non-profits who assisted them in removing their dam and restoring a beautiful creek on their property.



Photo 1. Sharrer's Mill dam (01-043). Summer 2005.



Photo 2. Sharrer's Mill dam site. May 2006



Photo 3. Sharrer's Mill dam former impoundment. May 2006.

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## More harm done than good?



A stagnant pool of water resides where the Conewago Creek once ran on Charisse Pittinger's property in New Chester. (Evening Sun Photo by Emily Rasinski). Purchase reprints of Evening Sun photos at [www.EveningSunPhotos.com](http://www.EveningSunPhotos.com).

By TIM PRATT

Evening Sun Reporter

About a mile above Dick's Dam, Dick Smith, 73, steered his pontoon boat Thursday evening while his son, Rich, 39, and his neighbor, Bob Hamm, 26, gazed lazily at the deep waters of Conewago Creek.

Along the banks, boats were tied up, rope swings hung from trees and birds swooped down over water. For these men, the serene setting of a late summer evening on the boat is happiness.

"We're river rats," Dick said with a laugh.

"Nobody knows the water like us," Rich chimed in.

When the boat came closer to the dam, Dick pointed to a buoy warning of danger ahead. In the trees, "No Trespassing," "No Swimming" and "No Diving" signs were posted on both sides of the creek. And when the boat pulled to the side of the dam, Dick pointed to "Private Property" and more "No Trespassing" signs.

Meanwhile, about three miles to the west, along the same creek, Charisse Pittinger walked barefoot through her back yard and stared out at boulders the size of cars, pools of green and brown stagnant water and hundreds of buzzing mosquitoes.

At one point, Pittinger said, the area of Conewago Creek that adjoins her property north of New Chester was constantly bustling with anglers, boaters and swimmers. Children played in the water, fisherman caught bass and trout, and boats floated around, much like they do today at Dick's Dam.

But that all changed when, earlier this year, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission demolished the 168-year-old Sharrer's Mill Dam to create easier fish passage up the creek.

Where there was once a deep waterway full of fish and other wildlife, there suddenly appeared stretches of rocks and shallow water. Where children once laughed and shouted, there is now algae and muck.

The decision by the Fish and Boat Commission to remove Sharrer's Mill Dam has infuriated many of the neighboring residents. A petition is even circulating in the community to stop dam removal along Conewago Creek.

"If I am not mistaken, West Nile virus is a big problem and concern in our state," Pittinger said. "Are we not being told to avoid having



standing water around our properties due to mosquitos that carry West Nile?"

Commission officials have said the dam, which was privately owned by the Sharrer family, was removed to allow for easier fish migration in Conewago Creek. The commission's low-head dam-removal program was established in the mid-1990s and primarily focuses on providing fish passage – particularly shad – in the Chesapeake Bay drainage area.

But many people who live along Conewago Creek feel the dam removal project has done more harm than good.

Rich Smith stood along the rocky creek bed at the former site of Sharrer's Mill Dam and pointed to water less than 6 inches deep with no fish in sight.

"The people that talk about these shad probably have nothing to do with the creek and don't live on it. They drive by and think 'Boy, that would be nice,' but they have no idea," he said. "Probably all of the people that live along Conewago Creek full-time would not care about the shad."

Smith shook his head as he looked at green puddles littered with trash and debris. Not only does the water bring the risk of disease, but it also brings down property values, he said.

"The people are putting these shad ahead of all the families," Rich said. "I don't know anybody that said they wanted to pull these dams out to put the shad here. Nobody that lives here."

But commission spokesman Dan Treddinick said despite the residents' West Nile concerns, stagnant water is common after a dam is removed. And, he said, the stream will eventually restore its old channel.

"Once a dam is removed it takes a stream maybe one or two years to re-cut it's natural channel through there," he said.

"Mother nature is very resilient," he continued. "It's often a matter of time, usually not very long, before you get a nice, free-flowing stream."

Besides the desire for improved fish migration, the commission was also concerned about the safety of the dams. Low-head dams create currents that pose a danger to boaters and swimmers, he said.

Water flows over the tops of the small dams, making it difficult to spot in time for boaters coming from upstream. An underwater churn is created by falling water and can make escaping very difficult, Treddinick said.

But as the Smiths and Hamm cruised along the Conewago above Dick's Dam, they made an effort to point out the numerous warning signs. Dick's Dam is owned, insured and maintained by the Dick's Dam Welfare Association, which is made up of about 100 property owners along the creek. The Smiths even regularly patrol the dam to make sure people are not doing anything illegal.

Despite their efforts, a pontoon boat capsized at Dick's Dam in June 2003 and six of the boat's 11 passengers were stranded on a small, twig-filled island in the center of the creek. That accident sent two children and two adults to the hospital.

And two friends drowned in 2005 at another low-head dam in Adams County. David Miller, 18, of East Berlin, and Justin Miller, 20, of Abbottstown, drowned last July after jumping off the East Berlin Dam on boogie boards. The search for their bodies also injured two firefighters.

Some state estimates show there are as many as 7,000 low-head dams in Pennsylvania. The Detter's Mill Dam northwest of Davidsburg was removed in 2004. It was the 14th dam to be removed on Conewago Creek.

Pittinger, who has lived alongside Sharrer's Mill for years, feels that dam removal needs to end.

"I, for one, find it hard to believe that our government determined that the dams were unsafe and needed to be removed. If people are dumb enough to play around and under the dams obviously they have no common sense or knowledge of waterways," Pittinger said. "Water is dangerous no matter where it is. É I do not think so."

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