

Construction begins on Fish Lake Dam makeover

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Groundbreaking was held recently at the Fish Lake Dam site near Dunvilla. Project partners include the Pelican Group of Lakes Improvement District, Minnesota DNR, Houston Engineering, Hough Inc, and local property managers. Submitted photo

In late 2016, the Pelican Group of Lakes Improvement District was awarded a Conservation Partners Legacy Grant from the DNR for funding to complete a modification of the Fish Lake Dam into a Rock Arch

Rapids Fishway.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also contributed funding from its Fish Passage program. PGOLID is working with Houston Engineering for survey, design and oversight of the project.

In late 2017, Hough, Inc out of Detroit Lakes was awarded the contract for construction of the project. Construction is scheduled to take place this February and March. The project should substantially be completed by the end of March 2018.

Time-lapse photography will track the project's progress and be available when it's completed. Through the construction, the current dam will not be

removed but will be modified. This new fishway will be built to hold water levels exactly as the current dam does, so that homeowners don't notice a difference.

To ensure the new fishway functions the same as the current dam, water level monitoring in the stream and lake has already been occurring to establish baseline conditions and will also occur after the project. The

rocks can be adjusted in the summer if needed for precise elevation targets.

The Fish Lake Dam, located near Dunvilla on the Pelican River, was built in 1932 for the purpose of maintaining consistent water levels in Pelican Lake. This dam has a long and storied history, including numerous partial washouts and patches, which caused drops in lake water levels of Pelican Lake and have left the dam in deteriorating shape.

An additional problem created by this dam, and many dams in general, is that they are barriers that make dispersal for river species difficult both up and downstream, but these structures can be converted in such a way that they are more favorable to passage of fish, muskrats, otters, shorebirds, waterfowl, salamanders, frogs, crayfish and other invertebrate species.

As part of the Red River of the North Fisheries Management Plan, the Minnesota DNR has listed goals of removing barriers to restore uninterrupted fish migration pathways. On the Pelican River there are nine dams and the Fish Lake Dam is the third one to be modified as rapids.

The Pelican Group of Lakes Improvement District (PGOLID), a taxing entity of lake property owners on Pelican, Little Pelican, Bass and Fish Lakes, has been working with the DNR on ideas for a more permanent fix to the dam to improve its structure, safety, and habitat for fish and wildlife. The design that would fit the goals of all groups involved, is to modify the dam into a rock arch rapids fishway, which is a structure that mimics shallow natural waterfalls in rivers that can be traversed by fish moving up and downstream from the falls.

A similar structure already exists at Dunton Locks County Park near Detroit Lakes and another was just completed this past summer in Barnesville on Whisky Creek at the Blue

Eagle Lake Park. This design will provide a long-term fix to the 84-year- old dam, which will improve the functionality of the dam, provide easier dispersal for river species up and downstream,

and provide spawning substrate for lake sturgeon.

Even though this project covers less than one acre of land, it will benefit the 14,790 acres of lakes and 84 river miles in the entire Pelican River Watershed by restoring connections.

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