

# Press Release

---

## Removing tens of thousands of obsolete dams in Europe will bring life back to rivers, says new report

**BRUSSELS, July 19** – With only 40 percent of Europe’s waterways in good condition, a new study published today calls for up to 30,000 redundant dams and other barriers to be removed to help restore rivers and lakes – boosting wildlife populations and benefiting communities across the continent. A new initiative called *Dam Removal Europe* aims to start an era of dam removal.

*Dam Removal: A viable solution for the future of our European Rivers* stresses that the density of dams, weirs and locks in Europe is far higher than previously suspected, with salmon, eel, sturgeon and other migratory fish encountering obstacles every kilometre on average. Previously, only dams higher than 10 metres were counted, but these represent less than 3 percent of all river barriers.

“Dams have played a critical role in Europe’s development but they have also contributed to the slow death of our rivers and the catastrophic decline in freshwater species,” said Stuart Orr, Freshwater Practice Lead for WWF. “Tens of thousands of small dams and barriers are no longer in use but they are still in place: blocking fish migrations, stopping the flow of sediment and nutrients, and undermining the value of rivers to people and nature.”

It is estimated that up to 30,000 mainly small dams are now obsolete. While these barriers provide no benefits to communities, they still prevent rivers from flowing freely, contributing to the disappearance of freshwater species, particularly migratory fish that cannot reach their spawning grounds. Obviously, this also affects birds feeding on fish as well as many other animals.

The report calls for governments across Europe to start removing these redundant dams, which will breathe life back into river systems and provide new economic opportunities for local economies. It will also help countries comply with the Water Framework Directive and boost efforts to reach its ambitious goals.

“Nature can recover remarkably fast when given the chance: dam removals in Europe have resulted in fish immediately returning to rivers for the first time in decades and existing species multiplying rapidly,” said Pao Fernández Garrido from World Fish Migration Foundation, one of the authors of the report. “As the fish return so do the fish eating birds and a wealth of other species dependent on healthy river systems and wetlands and so do fishers and birdwatchers, giving rural areas a new lease of life”.

The report lists a series of case studies that illustrate the remarkably rapid impact of dam removals. In the Netherlands, after two weirs were removed from the ‘Boven Slinge’ stream in 2015, the number of fish species in the newly connected stretches increased by an average of 30 percent and the number of individual animals increased by 148 percent. In nearby Denmark, the removal of a dam on the Gudenå River saw trout numbers upstream rise from zero to 4-5 per m<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, the removal of the Maisons-Rouges Dam in France in 1999 has resulted in a

# Press Release

---

spectacular surge in fish numbers with sea lamprey numbers soaring from barely any to over 41,000 within eight years.

Dam removals have slowly started to pick up the pace in Europe, and the Water Framework Directive's ambitious goals, timeline, and visionary approach to water management have been instrumental. Next year the largest European dam ever will be taken down; the 15 metre high Roche qui boit Dam and the 35 metre high Vezin Dam in the Sélune river in France.

"Dam removal is considered a very eco-efficient and cost-effective measure to reach the objectives of the Water Framework Directive to which all member states have committed themselves to", said Orr. "Dam removal is also significantly cheaper than maintaining aging, obsolete dams. Freeing rivers offers additional advantages from cleaning water naturally to boosting tourism numbers to restoring a river's natural flood defences – critical in the age of climate change. It is a no brainer: removing redundant dams costs less and achieves more.

The report's launch comes ahead of the review of the WFD which will take place later this year. While studies show that dam removal is a viable solution, there is an urgent need for all small and large dams in Europe to be mapped, including the priorities for dam removal. The report also calls for dam removals to be integrated into River Basin Management Plans (of the WFD), for the involvement of local communities in dam removal, and alternatives to new dams to be seriously considered.

---

## Notes for Editors:

The full report can be downloaded here: [www.damremoval.eu/policy-report](http://www.damremoval.eu/policy-report) (from 19th of July)

## About Dam Removal Europe

Dam Removal Europe (DRE) is a coalition of 5 organizations: WWF, World Fish Migration Foundation, European Rivers Network, The Rivers Trust and Rewilding Europe. DRE wants to create a community of people, organizations and governments that are committed to giving the European rivers more space. Because these are beautiful and full of possibilities. We do this by removing redundant small and large dams from the European rivers with local partners. Together, we ensure that European rivers can flow freely for humans and animals. More information: [www.damremoval.eu](http://www.damremoval.eu)