



Grand Rapids Works to Restore the Natural Flow of the Grand River

The Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP) in Grand Rapids, MI involves multiple federal, state, and local partners all working together to restore the rapids—and increase the public’s use—of the Grand River. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are the federal co-lead agencies for the Grand Rapids location. Additionally, a local nonprofit group, Grand Rapids Whitewater (GRWW), helps coordinate the effort. Strong support from the city and surrounding community has helped shape the project to ensure that it will have multiple environmental, economic, and social benefits.

ABOVE: The existing dams pose a danger to people using the river and restrict recreational activities, such as fishing and kayaking.

The Grand River is the longest river in Michigan, flowing over 250 miles before emptying into Lake Michigan. The River runs through the city of Grand Rapids, which was named for the natural rapids located in the heart of the downtown area. Currently, the natural flow of the historic rapids is disrupted by dams, which were originally built along the River to support the logging industry. A major goal of the project is to remove the dams in order to restore and recreate the namesake rapids to downtown Grand Rapids. The Grand Rapids location used funds from an EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant to commission a study evaluating levels of contaminants, such as arsenic, in river bottom sediments. This was an important step to ensure that dam removal activities would not stir up contaminated sediments that could harm human health or the environment.

Project Highlights

The UWFP in Grand Rapids is:

- Expanding and enhancing recreational opportunities in the Grand River
- Increasing river connectivity and improving river habitat for aquatic species
- Creating economic and job opportunities
- Instilling a river stewardship ethic in the community

Restoring Connectivity to Grand River

The project will remove five existing dams and improve the river bottom and fish habitats, which will reveal the historic rapids. Biologists and engineers have conducted scientific studies to better understand how the project will affect aquatic wildlife, water flows, and other river factors. Additionally, because dams play an important role in controlling invasive species, such as the sea lamprey, the UWFP will support the project to build a barrier to prevent sea lamprey from migrating upstream. Removal of the existing dams



ABOVE: Lake sturgeon are a threatened species in Michigan and also have spiritual importance to Native American tribes. Removing the dams in Grand Rapids will improve the river habitat for the lake sturgeon by increasing their access to breeding grounds located upstream.

and construction of the new barrier is expected to begin spring 2017 and will take two to three years to complete.

The dams restrict the movement of water, fish, and people along the Grand River. Because the dams are difficult to pass over, they pose a danger for recreational users of the river, such as fishers and kayakers. Similarly, many fish, including the threatened lake sturgeon, cannot pass over the dam to reach spawning grounds upstream. The lake sturgeon is spiritually important to Native American tribes, and the project's potential to improve the lake sturgeon habitat has been a major driver for tribal support and partnership.

Strong Community and Local Government Support

Strong support from the community has been integral to moving the project forward and ensuring that it will benefit the community in a variety of ways. Additionally, local businesses, philanthropic foundations, and individuals from the community have helped fund the project.

Mayor George Heartwell and the City of Grand Rapids have also been big supporters of the project. As the UWFP works to restore the rapids, the City will move forward with its own initiative to revitalize the land adjacent to the river. City plans include building public parks along sections of the riverbank and increasing pedestrian access to the river. Together, the UWFP and the City's initiatives will help connect Grand Rapids residents, especially underserved communities, to the river and a vibrant downtown district.

Environmental Restoration is Economic Restoration

Removing the dams and restoring the rapids will open the river to recreational activities and attract new users to the river, who will spend money at restaurants, hotels, and shops in Grand Rapids. According to an economic benefits study, expanded recreational use of the river and riverfront will stimulate a net new economic impact of \$15.9 - \$19.1 million per year. The study also estimates that the project could generate new development investment of \$285 million and create 1,520 related jobs in Grand Rapids. Commissioning the economic benefits study was important to demonstrate the sustainability of the project to partners, the community, and funders.

Instilling River Stewardship to Ensure Sustainable Results

As the project moves forward, local community groups are inspiring Grand Rapids residents to take pride in their urban waterway. The Grand Rapids Public Museum is educating local students about the Grand River watershed. Using this knowledge, the students will provide ideas for museum exhibits to educate the community about their watershed. Creating a sense of river stewardship and pride is important to ensure that the social, environmental, and economic benefits resulting from the project will last for years to come.

Measuring Success

Before starting the project, the Grand Rapids UWFP established baseline values for several economic and environmental factors. Once the project is complete, these values will allow them to determine how the project improves or increases:

- Tourism associated with recreational activities, such as kayaking and fishing
- Taxable values for riverfront property
- New riverfront development projects and related jobs
- Lake sturgeon populations
- Ecological health of the river