

Dam Removal Begins in September

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : August 24, 2011 at 6:10 am

Olympia, WA - Two dams on Washington's Elwha River will be removed beginning in September. The work is expected to take about three years - but it's been at least 40 years in the making.

Rick Rutz of Seattle first began questioning how new dams were approved and existing dams re-licensed - complex federal processes he felt discouraged public input. The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe already was concerned about the aging Elwha and Glines Canyon Dams on the Olympic Peninsula. Rutz, who suggested the dams come out to help restore salmon habitat, says the initial reaction was anything but positive.

"When I first proposed this, the agencies ran and hid in the bushes. The politicians would not come anywhere close to it. 'Tearing out a dam? You can't do that!' 'How can you do it? And why would you do it? It's crazy.' "

Today, Rutz says giving up was never an option. Removal of the dams is expected to restore 70 miles of the Elwha River and its tributaries, and produce one of the largest salmon runs in the Northwest.

Earthjustice advised on some legal aspects of the case over the years, which attorney Todd True says has resulted in greater public input on other dams, and dam-removal projects around the country.

"This is a story about how the law can really catalyze some remarkable change, because the law that Rick began to work with about re-licensing these dams put this issue into the daylight so that there could actually be a discussion about it."

Today, some refer to the historic tear-down as a miracle. Rutz disagrees, saying it was the result of years of hard work and tough questions from a lot of people.

"These big sorts of things, they don't happen by the political process starting them. The ones who make these things happen are the public, and in the public, I'm including the tribes. The public is not only a major part of it - it's the essential part of it."

Scientists and federal agencies will be monitoring the federally funded project with special interest because hundreds of dams are at least 50 years old and decisions must be made about whether to maintain or remove them.

Photos and background on the dam-removal process are online at elwhainfo.org.