

Reconnecting rivers at a
pace and scale that matters

Appalachians Free Rivers Accelerator

Freshwater systems are the arteries of our planet, vital to life and well-being. They nourish ecosystems, replenish aquifers, soften the blow of floods, and nurture culture and community. Rivers connect us all.

In North America, the rivers of the Appalachian landscape—stretching from Alabama to Maine and into eastern Canada—form a biodiversity hotspot. These waters are teeming with life. Appalachian rivers host more than half of all freshwater fish species found in the United States and Canada.

Water from many of these rivers, filtered by the forests around them, provide a clean source of drinking water for millions of people along the East coast of the U.S.

Appalachian rivers shape the region's identity, foster its biodiversity and sustain its people.

The Challenge

The health of Appalachian rivers is threatened by thousands of outdated and unused dams. Many are aging and obsolete, and with the intensifying effect of climate change, pose escalating risks to people and ecosystems.

Dams fragment our rivers. They separate fish from the habitats they need to thrive and adapt to climate change. They degrade water quality and often heighten flood risks.

Urgent action is needed now to restore Appalachian rivers. The good news: we know that the benefits of dam removal for river health and for nearby communities can be dramatic and durable—and we have a plan.



90%

of eastern U.S. rivers are
impaired by diminished
connectivity



80%

of the dams in our rivers are
obsolete and most are legacies of
industries that no longer exist



70,000

dams in the Appalachians are
contributing to the continued
decline of biodiversity



An Innovative Solution

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is committed to bringing bold solutions to life, engaging communities and both taking the lead and supporting partners to remove dams across the Appalachians.

To increase the collective pace and scale of dam removal in the Appalachians, TNC is launching a ground-breaking initiative: **The Free Rivers Accelerator**. Over the past five years, just 2.5 dams per year have been removed in each Appalachian state. Together, we must act far more quickly to address the magnitude of the need. The Free Rivers Accelerator is the first initiative of its kind to unite the policy reforms, technical capacity and project pipeline development required to restore free-flowing rivers more efficiently and at scale.

Working with our partners, we have identified key areas that hamper dam removal progress, from limited technical capacity to fragmented interstate collaboration. Looking across these factors, The Free Rivers Accelerator is initially targeting two strategies:

Build a Robust Project Pipeline

The Accelerator identifies high-impact projects and optimizes efficiency and readiness by:

- deepening engagement with local organizations,
- engaging dam-owners and communities equitably,
- completing preliminary engineering assessments and design

Create Conditions For More and Faster Impact

The Accelerator helps increase removal rates by:

- fostering policies, regulations and programs that reduce permit bottlenecks and create incentive mechanisms,
- advancing blended and alternative finance mechanisms,
- cultivating public support and understanding of dam removal benefits

The Nature Conservancy is beginning this work across the northern part of Appalachians—from New England to New Jersey, with a plan to quickly apply what we learn to the full Appalachian region.

With our partners, **we have identified 200 priority dams** based on ecological and social benefits, project feasibility and readiness. By moving quickly to facilitate their removal while continuing to prioritize additional complex projects that are critical for the recovery of aquatic species and community safety we will reconnect over 21,000 miles of river systems.

How You Can Help

With your support, we can catalyze a shift in how dam removals are prioritized, funded and implemented. Please join us in restoring rivers, protecting communities and reshaping the future of freshwater in America.

Together, we can conserve our precious freshwater ecosystems for today and long into the future. Contact us to see how you can help.

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