

Restoring the Root River



RUMORS AND RESPONSES TO THE HORLICK DAM REMOVAL PLAN

Racine County Public Works Meeting (03/14/24): Responses to Questions from the Public

1. **"The alternatives to removal have not been studied enough. There are too many unanswered questions."** Not true. Alternatives have been studied over the last 14 years in two different plans – one from SEWRPC's (Root River Plan - 2013) and the USACE's (Horlick Dam Plan - 2023). Both plans afforded public input and review.

"The Root River plan includes four alternatives for reconstructing the spillway and one to remove the dam. Based on environmental considerations – including water quality, fish community effects, and flooding – the plan recommends that the dam be removed." (Root River Plan, Exec. Sum.)

Seven Root River Plan advisory committee meetings were held from 2012 to 2013. The Horlick Dam and impoundment were discussed in these meetings, then analyzed and summarized by SEWRPC in pages 354 through 375 over two years. Alternatives were developed by SEWRPC and described in pages 471 through 502.

"The (Advisory) Committee reviewed each chapter of the plan in draft form and provided comments and recommendations, which were addressed in the final plan. In addition, presentations were made to the RRRPG summarizing the content of draft chapters and reporting on progress. As draft chapters of the plan were completed, copies were placed in downloadable form on the SEWRPC website. This website also included a webpage on which members of the public could ask questions and submit comments on the draft plan. Copies of presentations to the RRRPG by SEWRPC staff were also placed on this website." (Root River Plan, Pg. 9)

"The (USACE's) Final Integrated Feasibility Report and Environmental Assessment (IFR/EA), incorporated herein by reference, assessed, and evaluated various alternatives that would restore natural riverine processes within the study area for native fish, wildlife, and plant communities. In addition to a "no action" plan, five (5) additional alternatives were evaluated. The alternatives were evaluated by an iterative screening process. The process identified several plans for restoration that were incrementally justified by their cost per habitat benefit. (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Exec. Sum., Pg. 1)

"For all alternatives, the potential (wildlife) effects were evaluated, as appropriate. A summary assessment of the potential effects of the recommended plan are listed in Table 1. Aquatic resources/wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat, and threatened/endangered species/critical habitat are categorized as "Resources unaffected by action," (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Table 1) with the 'action' being dam removal.

2. **"I've never noticed on any of the plans a repairing project alternative. It always starts with, 'How are we going to tear it down?'"** False. Repair, rebuild, and modify alternatives have been studied in SEWRPC's Root River Plan (2013) and USACE's Horlick Dam Plan (2023). Both studies concluded that a repair, replace or modify alternative is too costly and does not address the poor water quality and degraded habitat upstream of the dam.

"Table 9 shows the monetary investment layout and benefits gained towards the federal objective. Alternative (A) Dam Removal clearly maximizes benefits towards the federal objective, has the lowest federal and non-federal expenditure, and requires no operations and maintenance since the alternative restores the natural feature by removing a manmade structure and returning riverine processes." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Table 9)

3. **"I think what we ought to be doing before we make the definite decision is maybe do a few more studies on the wildlife. Very little was talked about the birds, the ducks, the eagle that lives in our neighborhood, and beavers, turtles ... all these things are going to be affected by the change of this river."** Yes, wildlife will be affected in a positive way as significant habitat studies and local research were done as part of the USACE's Horlick Dam Plan. The goal of the USACE's Great Lakes Fish and Ecosystem Restoration Program is to make habitats better, not worse,

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which is why their research and analysis recommend the dam be removed. The additional wetlands created when the impoundments are drained will provide excellent habitat for ducks, turtles, and a myriad of other species vital to the river system's food chain.

"The dam removal alternative would not have any direct or indirect, long-term significant adverse effects to resident and migratory birds and has the potential to provide beneficial impacts with the newly exposed riparian habitat." (pg. 82)

"During the NEPA Scoping process the USFWS was sent a letter on November 9, 2020 requesting information on potential species in the area and any potential impacts to habitat pursuant to the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA) (16 U.S.C. 661-666(e)). USFWS provided a letter on July 11, 2023 in support of the recommended plan." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Pg. 98)

"U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) IPaC program listed 17 potential migratory birds that could be found at the project location (Appendix A). Over 202 species of resident and migratory bird species have been recorded within a one-mile radius of the Horlick Dam removal study area (Appendix A). Of the 17 IPaC listed potential migratory birds at the project location, 12 species have been observed in the area, several notable species include bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), American bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) and lesser yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*). No known nests of potentially migratory birds listed on IPaC have been found in the project area. (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, pg. 81)

"Local residents have noted the presence of bald eagles and sandhill cranes along the Root River in this reach. Neither species are listed as threatened or endangered, however they are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). "The restoration of the stream channel morphology will aid in the development of heterogenous riparian habitat. This increase in habitat can provide stopover areas for migratory birds and diverse year-round habitat for resident bird species." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, pg. 82)

"Bald eagles require a good food base, perching areas and nesting sites. Traditionally, bald eagles were found nesting near rivers, lakes and marshes. Their habitat can include estuaries, large lakes, reservoirs, rivers and some seacoasts. They're also increasingly found in drier areas that are farther from water sources such as farmland and urban and suburban habitat." ([Bald Eagle | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service \(fws.gov\)](#))

- "Yes, it's cheaper to partner with the Army Corps of Engineers to remove the dam, but then is the county going to invest millions in bridges, boardwalks, piers and kayak launches and the related maintenance to make the river accessible to everyone?" "In (Burlington's) situation, the plans to remove or replace the dam were about the same once you factored in all of the acceptable amenities required by the community for either option."** No, the problems, solutions, and costs for the Horlick Dam are different than the dam in Burlington. The cost to Racine County is only \$275,000 – not millions as claimed. The river will be more accessible to everyone because it is no longer blocked – bridges and boardwalks are not needed. Easier access to more fishable waters will occur upstream of where the dam currently limits access. "Table 9 shows the monetary investment layout and benefits gained towards the federal objective. Alternative (A) Dam Removal clearly maximizes benefits towards the federal objective, has the lowest federal and non-federal expenditure, and requires no operations and maintenance since the alternative restores the natural feature by removing a manmade structure and returning riverine processes." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Table 9)

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5. **"Removal could cause invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed to germinate sooner, grow stronger and live longer. With no follow-up ... (the corps' plan) is insufficient, and it's putting too much of a burden on the homeowners or property owners who are going to have to deal with these invasive species."** True. There is the potential for invasive species to grow in the shoreline areas as with any river in southeastern Wisconsin, so adaptive management by the USACE and Racine County will be necessary.

"A 3-year contract would be utilized to ensure recruitment and establishment of native riverine communities (abiotic and biotic) is successful." "Options would be placed in the contract for future adaptive management measures that could be exercised at any point of the contract duration, but most likely in years 2, and 3. These may include but are not limited to changing or adjusting features to achieve the required hydrology, hydraulics and/or geomorphology; additional native plant treatments; or other improvements. All adaptive management decisions and exercising of contract options would be driven by monitoring. To be conservative, three adaptive management options would be included under this measure for high, medium and low adaptive adjustment needs." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Pg. 27)

In addition, Root-Pike WIN is willing to work with affected landowners and Racine County to secure additional grants for enhancing native vegetation and eradicating invasive vegetation, if necessary, after the USACE's three-year management plan is complete.

6. **"There's been mention that the removal of the dam will restore the river back to its natural state and restore the natural habitat. My question is, what about the habitat that's been formed by having the dam in place?"** The habitat upstream of the dam is currently rated as "very poor" by the USACE, which is the primary reason they are so interested in removing the dam.

The construction of the original Horlick Dam in 1834 and following reconstructions, contributed to a significant loss of natural parameters and process that sustain and create native riverine and riparian habitats. The current Horlick Dam was rebuilt in 1974 and continues to fragment the river and is the most significant fish passage obstruction on the Root River, blocking upstream passage to 160 miles of river and tributary habitat and an estimated 6,176 acres of connect wetlands. The purpose of the proposed project is to restore riverine habitat and connectivity to a stretch of river chronically impacted by the presence of the Horlick Dam. (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Exec. Sum. Pg. i)

"One of the primary causes of natural habitat and species loss within the Great Lakes is attributed to the damming of confluent river and stream channels. The Horlick Dam has had a major (negative) influence on the physical structure, biodiversity, and historic character of the Root River ecosystem, suppressing the natural processes that created and sustained a once pristine riverine gorge." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Pg. 15)

"EX HSI scores for the Root River study reaches upstream of the dam are 26 near the boat launch, and 28 near river mile 7, both of which are classified as "very poor" stream habitat." The dam removal project would dramatically increase the current habitat unit score of 27 ("very poor") to 87 ("excellent") in the upstream section. Downstream scores would move up from 84 to 87, which is already "excellent". (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Fig. 10)

"The project will protect the public interest by reestablishing quality habitat and riverine connection to Lake Michigan." (USACE Horlick Dam Plan, Pg. 100)