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Ocklawaha Restoration Ranks High in Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership Assessment

By Gail Hankinson, Esquire

A new assessment tool quantifying the ecological benefits of dam removal has been developed by the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP) together with the Conservation Biology Institute and Astute Spruce LLC. Removing the Rodman Dam on the Ocklawaha River was ranked second out of 2,589 aquatic barrier projects for Florida based on the amount of habitat to be gained and the condition of the watershed. It ranked only behind the Jim Woodruff Dam in Georgia impacting Apalachicola Bay in Florida.

SARP is a collaboration of natural resource and science agencies, conservation organizations and private interests focused on strengthening the management and conservation of aquatic resources in 14 southeastern states and Puerto Rico. The group assists in implementing the US Fish and Wildlife Service Fish Habitat Action Plan.

The interactive Southeast Aquatic Barrier Inventory and Prioritization Tool used to prioritize dams and road-stream crossings is available on the SARP website (<https://connectivity.sarpdata.com/#prioritize>). The Tool allows the aquatic conservation community to view, prioritize and extract data from an inventory of 140,000 aquatic barriers in the southeast. It continues to be refined based on feedback from professionals.

The combined score of four metrics including network connectivity, network complexity, network sinuosity, and floodplain natural landcover is used to rank each potential barrier removal project. The four metrics are not equally weighted. Network connectivity provides one half of the weighted score. A high priority project would reconnect a large area of good quality habitats, and the intended purpose of the dam would no longer be a competing consideration. The SARP assessment leaves the consideration of intended purpose up to local partners.

Network connectivity factors and reconnection of good quality habitats accounted for the high ranking for the Rodman Dam. According to the assessment, reestablishing a free-flowing Ocklawaha River to its historic channel will result in 377 miles of additional network connectivity upstream of the dam, more than 20 miles of which are designated as an Aquatic Preserve and Outstanding Florida Waters. The reconnected river network includes small streams, creeks and tributaries in the Ocklawaha watershed including the Silver River and historic Silver Springs, one of the largest artesian springs in America. More than 20 additional springs and spring runs submerged by the dam's impoundment will be uncovered. The catchment area and floodplain of the restored river network would be extensive with 96 percent in natural landcover.

According to Dr. Robert Knight, Executive Director, Florida Springs Institute, “Silver Springs will never be fully restored without the removal of the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam on the Ocklawaha River. Migratory fish from the Atlantic Ocean and St. Johns River, including striped bass, channel catfish, striped mullet, American shad, American eels, and Atlantic sturgeon, are critical to a productive Silver Springs ecosystem.”

The downstream flow would also help support a sustainable 100-mile St. Johns River Estuary. “Ocklawaha River restoration would increase freshwater flows in the Lower Ocklawaha and St. John Rivers by millions of gallons a day due to less evaporation off the artificial pool and uncovering of more than 20 springs flooded by the Rodman Dam,” explains James Gross, geologist and Executive Director of Florida Defenders of the Environment.

The 52-year-old Rodman Dam, past its life expectancy and needing major repairs, was built as part of the defunct Cross Florida Barge Canal. The federal project was halted in 1971 after one third of its infrastructure, including the Rodman Dam, had been completed.

Although the artificial pool created by the Dam has been a popular fishing area, use of the impounded river has gone down, invasive aquatic weed growth is increasing and visitor expenditures on the natural end of the river are twice those of the impoundment <https://www.freetheocklawaha.com/economic-importance-and-public-preferences-for-water-resource-management-of-the-ocklawaha-river/>.

A 2001 United States Forest Service Environmental Impact Statement determined that partial restoration could achieve high environmental benefits while allowing for retention of the Rodman Recreation Park amenities. Partial restoration would remove 2,000 feet of the 7,200-foot earthen levee blocking reconnection of Silver Springs, the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers.

In addition to prioritization of the Rodman Dam by SARP, the Ocklawaha River, the largest tributary of the St. Johns River, recently received national designation by American Rivers as one of America’s Most Endangered Rivers®. American Rivers cited the Rodman Dam as a threat to clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreation. Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition just released the Ocklawaha Green and Gold Report highlighting the economic benefits of Ocklawaha restoration based on a new assessment from economist Dr. Alan Hodges. The report link can be found at the bottom of <https://freetheocklawaha.com>

Gail Hankinson is a retired attorney, admitted to the Florida and Georgia Bar Associations. She worked for Governor Bob Graham as Coastal Zone Management attorney and for Georgia Governor Roy Barnes in Georgia’s Greenspace Program and served as Deputy General Counsel for Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Hankinson worked for 19 years with St. Johns River Water Management District. At the District, she was heavily involved in the early efforts to restore Lake Apopka and the SWIM Programs. She served as State Co-Chair of the Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program’s Management Committee. She was a District regulatory enforcement attorney for nine years. She currently volunteers on the board of Sustainable Tallahassee, serves as Chair of the Community Carbon Fund, and collaborates with the Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition.