



American Climate Partners

Rural resilience through environmental restoration

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Rapidan River Restoration – A Story of Sustenance

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Dear Rapidan Partnership,

As I write this on a rainy late Fall Day at our Headquarters at Historic Rapidan Mill, American Climate Partners, thanks to the incredible generosity of Don King, Mark and Ann Kington, and David and Elizabeth Perdue, are about to close on the purchase of the Rapidan Mill dam and associated real estate in Culpeper County. This purchase is critical to a long-term effort to complete one of the largest dam removal projects in North America, according to American Rivers, a nonprofit that has been at the forefront of protecting and restoring rivers for nearly 50 years.

We first dreamed of this day in 2019, when we moved our offices from Orange to Rapidan; it has been a long road and we have hardly even started. While we are grateful to our supporters for providing funds to secure capital assets and operating funds thus far, income to support project administration this year has been significantly less than expenses. Thus, we have created a once in a lifetime opportunity to leave a legacy through the project, which I explain below.

But first, let me provide some context and history. 100 years ago, the California Oregon Power Company and U.S. Government began building the Klamath River Hydroelectric project consisting of four dams on the Klamath River bordering California and Oregon. In 2002, a massive fish kill left over 60,000 adult salmon rotting along the banks of the Klamath River on the Yurok Reservation. Since then, Klamath Basin indigenous tribes, along with commercial and recreational fishermen and environmental groups have worked on removing the cause of the kill – the hydroelectric dams. On November 17, after a 20-year struggle, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) approved removal of those dams, reconnecting 300 miles of fish habitat.



Eighty-six years ago, the present day concrete Rapidan Mill dam was constructed in front of an earlier log dam, perhaps all or portions of which date back to 1772. Whenever exactly that earliest structure was completed, 500 miles of upstream habitat for American Shad and other anadromous fish was instantly cut off. It's unlikely that the Virginia hydro-entrepreneurs likely celebrating that first day of operation in a bedrock outcrop of what would later become Waugh's Ford had any idea that they had just built a structure that blocked more upstream fishery than any ever constructed in what four years later would become the United States of America. Also interesting is that six years later, the British would stretch a seine across the Schuylkill to stop shad from reaching George Washington's army at Valley Forge in the Spring of 1778. It wasn't successful, according to Continental Soldier Nathan Hale – an uncommonly early run of the shad saved Washington and his army – and our nation.



In 2020, American Climate Partners (formerly the Center for Natural Capital) with ten supporting Founders launched the Rapidan Fish Passage Project. The goal of the project is to reconnect the Rapidan River headwaters with the Atlantic Ocean, and once again share the river with American Shad, our “Founding Fish”



(*The Founding Fish*, John McPhee, 2002), and related species.

In 2021-2022, with the help of generous donors, we completed Phase I Due Diligence investigations and reports. In 2023, we launch a second phase of due diligence, tackling projects such as preparation of a lengthy surrender report and application to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, required before we can commence physical alteration of the former power-generating structure.

We say “alteration” because we know we will most likely be leaving pieces of the concrete dam at either end, not completely remove it. There are also significant expenses with preparation of findings and reports needed to explore sources of funds to pay for the deconstruction work, presently estimated to be well over \$1 million.

Regarding funds for deconstruction, broadly speaking there are two paths forward. The first is traditional public/private grants and donations. The second is a more entrepreneurial approach – creation of a dam removal-based river restoration mitigation bank that would sell environmental credits to the Virginia Department of Transportation and real estate developers. We are exploring both of these as they show promise. The US Fish and Wildlife Department signaled earlier this year they could provide a significant chunk of deconstruction costs.

In addition, with private sector partners, we submitted a mitigation bank proposal to the US Army Corps of Engineers based on a crediting methodology positively reviewed for another, significantly smaller, dam removal project in Virginia. This path would provide 100% of the funds needed, not only for deconstruction, but long term restoration of upstream river banks and fisheries restoration. This path could also provide long

term funds needed for American Climate Partners to commit to making the historic Rapidan Mill our permanent headquarters, continue restoration of the Mill office building, and begin restoration of the milling buildings and silos, much of which is in very poor condition, for future sustainable cottage industries. We hope to be able to decide on the best path forward in early 2023.

We also plan to launch community outreach and listening sessions in 2023. If an early dam was actually built here in 1772-73, this would be its 250th anniversary. Our organization is committed to historic preservation as a pillar of the Rapidan Fish Passage Project. Although much is gone to recycling and scavengers, remnant milling equipment remains in the buildings. It's not a stretch to vision a future portion of the Mill as a small historical museum focused on the history of milling intertwined with river ecology, supported by donations from local history buffs, businesses, and tourism.

If you have read this far, we thank you. And as we indicated at the start of this message, we need your help. Unlike other programs we have bootstrapped, this project is too big for that approach. We need a big tent of supporters – individuals, families, businesses, foundations, and government agencies together rowing in the same direction to get this project through the next 24 months. Our Founders got us off the ground. And now we need another round of donors, whom we are calling Patrons, to help move this project to the next level and through to the start of the dam alteration in 2024-25.

There is a gigantic slab of vertical concrete that is part of the dam spillway on the Culpeper side of the river that is keyed into the bedrock (tagged with a green star in image above). We hope to leave that in place after alteration. Our plan is to turn that vertical slab into a Rapidan River Memorial Wall to honor significant donors to the Fish Passage Project. We need to add at least 20 Patrons at a minimum donation of \$2500, scaled to amount, during this holiday season to generate enough income to meet 2022/23 project expenses.

I find it sort of poetic that for two centuries, this river, the Mill, and the dam provided essential sustenance to the humans of the area, while depriving sustenance to the fish. Now, human ingenuity has put a financial value on this lost natural asset to an extent that will enable its eventual restoration. While there is much wrong with this world there is also much good about it.

Thank you for considering a gift to this once-in-a-generation project. It is literally the case that we cannot do this alone.

With deep gratitude,



Michael Collins
Executive Director
American Climate Partners

