

**Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (MassDCR)
Bel Air Dam (MA1061) Removal, Pittsfield, MA
October 2024 Summary**

BACKGROUND: The Bel Air Dam (MA1061) is located in the City of Pittsfield in Berkshire County and impounds the West Branch of the Housatonic River. Bel Air Dam is located approximately 1.1 miles downstream of Pontoosuc Lake. The dam is accessed on the east side of Wahconah Street and is located west of Lenox Avenue. The dam was originally constructed in 1832 and was used for power generation for a woolen mill until the 1920s. In the 1940s the use of the mill for wool production was abandoned. Bel Air Dam is now located upstream of several businesses, residences, and thoroughfares. In accordance with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation's (DCR) Office of Dam Safety (ODS) regulations, Bel Air Dam is classified as a HIGH (Class I) Hazard Potential dam. The owner of the dam is deceased. The dam is currently not in compliance with DCR dam safety regulations due to its condition, which has been determined to be structurally deficient.



Approximately 10 years ago, DCR partnered with the City of Pittsfield to stabilize the sluiceway, and since then has annually cleared sluiceway debris in order to maintain the lowest feasible water level at the dam. In addition, ODS staff periodically inspect Bel Air Dam as part of regular patrols to identify issues and implement minor repairs and maintenance as needed.

Since 2019, DCR has been working collaboratively with the City of Pittsfield to evaluate alternatives of repair or dam removal in order to address the structural deficiencies and bring Bel Air Dam into compliance with DCR's dam safety regulations. The



alternatives analysis completed as part of a 2019 Phase II Investigation determined that sediment removal and management costs are the largest cost factor for the dam removal alternative. Therefore, in 2021, sediment sampling and analysis was conducted to characterize impounded sediment, identify disposal options, and to update the probable construction costs for managing the dam and sediment. The sediment analysis identified that the impounded sediments contain elevated levels of chromium, arsenic, lead, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and extractable petroleum hydrocarbons (EPHs). The source of the contaminants does not appear related to previous mill operations but more likely occurred from historic drainage inflows from unknown sources to the pond where the highest concentrations were located at drainage outfalls to the pond. The City of Pittsfield and DCR elected to proceed with dam removal (including sediment management)

rather than dam repair.

In late 2023, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts announced an allocation of \$20 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for the project. Subsequently, an in-person public meeting was held in December 2023 to introduce the project to the community and share initial conceptual designs. In 2024, DCR's ODS and its consultant, AECOM, collected additional on-site data and advanced the design and permitting of the Bel Air Dam Removal project. In October 2024, the City of Pittsfield obtained ownership of the parcels including Bel Air Dam (400 Wahconah Street) as well as the parcel containing the impounded water upstream of the Dam through Eminent Domain.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The currently proposed project includes removal of Bel Air Dam and excavation of accumulated sediments as needed to create a restored stream channel and stable adjacent riverbanks. Sediment removed from Bel Air Dam will be disposed of out-of-state to reduce the risk of adverse public health effects in the surrounding community related to exposure to chromium, lead and other sediment contaminants. Approximately 35,500 cubic yards (CY) of contaminated sediment will be excavated to create a stable stream channel, riverbanks, and river floodplain bench. Inaccessible sediments will be managed with the installation of an impenetrable cap backfilled with clean soil. The project includes invasive plant removal and an ongoing vegetation management plan, as well as the installation of native plants, including willows, speckled alder and herbaceous plants on the floodplain bench along the restored stream channel, application of a native seed mix and introduction of larger woody species in selected locations of the restored site. Most permits for the project have been obtained or are anticipated to be issued by November 2024. DCR plans to advertise the project for construction bidding in November 2024 and to select a contractor to implement the project by December 2024.



Active construction at the Bel Air Dam site is expected to begin in 2025 after spring high flows in the West Branch of the Housatonic River recede. Dredging may include a combination of mechanical and hydraulic dredging, depending on the approach proposed by the selected construction contractor. The 400 Wahconah Street parcel is planned to be used as a construction staging area, including the potential management of excavated sediment via dewatering, treatment for solidification, and testing before transport out-of-state. The project design includes flow by-pass requirements to reduce the contact of water with active dredging areas and minimize turbidity transport downstream. Similarly, the contractor will also be limited to actively dredging within approximately one-quarter to one-third of the site at any time in order to mitigate site disruption during large storm events. It is anticipated that

dredging, stream restoration, sediment management, and vegetation efforts will occur over two construction seasons, from spring 2025 to December 2026.

During this large construction project, the adjacent community, including environmental justice (EJ) mapped census blocks, may be disrupted. The City of Pittsfield, DCR and AECOM have worked closely on a project traffic plan to mitigate these disruptions. One lane of Wahconah Street will be closed to allow construction access; one-way northbound traffic on Wahconah Street will be maintained, and a pedestrian and traffic management plan for general vehicular traffic, school buses, Berkshire Regional Transit Authority, and pedestrians will be in place during construction. Air and Water Quality monitoring protocols will also be implemented during construction to minimize impacts in the project area.

The project website www.BelAirDamRemoval.com provides additional details regarding the project design and permitting; this project website will be updated as construction proceeds.