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FARMINGTON RIVER

THREAT: Hydropower dam

STATES: Connecticut, Massachusetts

AT RISK: Clean drinking water, fish and wildlife

SUMMARY

The Farmington River is a vital source of clean drinking water for the region, supports diverse fish and wildlife, and provides boating and other recreation opportunities. But the Rainbow Dam, an outdated hydropower dam, is sapping life from the river, blocking fish migration and spurring outbreaks of toxic algae blooms that are harmful to people, pets, and wildlife. The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) and Farmington River Power Company (FRPC) must ensure that dam operations meet reasonable standards for the health of the river as well as public health and safety.

THE RIVER

The Farmington River watershed covers over 600 square miles in Massachusetts and Connecticut. It holds two national Partnership Wild & Scenic River designations and is a major tributary to the Connecticut River which spans across 4 states. The watershed has been utilized and stewarded by Indigenous people for more than 12,000 years, and in the 1600s, Algonkian speaking groups such as the Tunxis and Mahican Tribes called this area home. Due to colonization and displacement, there are currently no federally recognized Tribal lands along the river, but descendants of these groups still live throughout Connecticut and surrounding areas.

The Farmington and its tributaries support cold-water resident fish species and habitat for various important migratory fish species. The watershed is highly regulated as a public drinking water supply for the Hartford region with impoundments and diversions governed by a variety of contracts and management agreements. There are currently three active hydropower projects at the mouth, upstream, and in the headwaters of the river.

The West Branch of the Farmington is a highly regarded trout fishery and the river provides stretches of whitewater, used by individuals including world-class paddlers, and outfitters, further adding to its cultural value as a coveted recreation destination. The Farmington is a crucial part of life to plants, animals and people alike, all of which depend on it for survival and wellness.

THE THREAT

The continued success of decades of work to protect and restore the Farmington River as a world-class cold-water fishery, recreation destination, and potential home for hundreds of thousands of migratory fish species hinges on threats posed by the first dam in the watershed.

FARMINGTON RIVER
WATERSHED ASSOCIATION

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FARMINGTON RIVER

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TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/
FARMINGTONRIVER2024](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/FARMINGTONRIVER2024)



Eight miles upstream from where the Farmington River joins the Connecticut River is the Rainbow Dam, owned by the FRPC. This small hydropower dam has been in operation since the early 20th century, but due to a quirk of law, it has no federal oversight. Federal regulation of hydropower dams requires that a river be deemed “navigable,” and over fifty years ago the Farmington—despite its significant flows and many boaters consistently using the river—was ruled “non-navigable” by the federal government.

The resulting lack of federal oversight and limited state jurisdiction has allowed this small and poorly maintained

hydropower project, whose inadequate and outdated fishway often led to fish mortality before it was shut down in 2023, to effectively render more than 95% of the watershed’s habitat inaccessible to river herring, shad, eel, and sea lamprey. The dam is also responsible for creating river conditions in the upstream reservoir that have repeatedly caused toxic algae blooms that can be a health hazard to people, and can be lethal to pets and wildlife. These blooms have forced the state to seasonally close a public boat ramp and a summer camp located on the river to prohibit swimming and boating during periods of the summer. The FRPC’s operation of the dam releases large pulses of water at unpredictable times, harming aquatic life. The state has said these flows harm the river, and the section below the dam is listed as impaired for aquatic life due to flow. Because of its current operation and failure to safely pass migratory fish, the Rainbow Dam causes the Farmington River to be in violation of the federal Clean Water Act and state laws.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Farmington River Power Company needs to be held accountable for dam operations and ensuring they meet reasonable standards for public health and safety, and the health of the river. The company can take advantage of current unprecedented funding opportunities to make a difference this year before they expire. At a minimum, this includes changing operations to fix the Clean Water Act violations, eliminate the toxic algae outbreaks, and to provide safe, timely and effective fish passage. The company has had well over a century of largely unrestricted use of the Farmington River—it is time for dam operations to meet reasonable standards so the public can have clean water and a healthy river.