



Removing Barriers to Remove Barriers

Migratory fish that start their lives in the freshwater streams of Connecticut and New York swim through Long Island Sound and then head out to the ocean. Once they're adults, they make the journey back to their original streams to produce the next generation. In the past, there were millions of these fish making these trips. But since Colonial times, over 30,000 dams and culverts, across the two states, broke that connection. Today, these fish are abundant only in rivers that are free of barriers.

The scale of the problem is huge. There's a dam for almost every square mile in Connecticut and New York. Many of these barriers are old and poorly maintained. In August 2024, we saw how dangerous they can be when two aging dams failed after heavy rains leading to devastating flooding that tore up roads and damaged parks, homes, and businesses in the New York boundary of the Sound. These barriers also lead to erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater, and water quality problems which harm both the environment and local communities.

Our support for the *Long Island Sound River Restoration Network* known as the "RRN" started in 2022 to restore the Sound and its inland streams by removing these chokepoints. An amazing collaboration of experts, the *RRN* is made up of eight organizations working together to speed up the pace of barrier removals in the region. They focus on "People," "Projects," and "Policy" in their work. *People* involves educating dam owners, the public, and often local government by pulling together the strongest messages and materials, to explain what it means to remove a barrier and illustrate possible site designs. They combat myths (like "removing a dam causes flooding") and help everyone see the long-term benefits to nature and the community. *Projects* are the heart of the *RRN*. They don't aim to remove every single barrier but most often focus on specific ones that are failing or no longer needed. When it comes to *Policy*, the *RRN* works closely with public agencies that oversee barrier removals.

And, it's all working. The *RRN* allows members to share skills, knowledge, and lessons learned in new ways. Right now, there are over 20 active dam removal and culvert replacement projects led or supported jointly by *RRN* members with strong support from owners! They've even figured out a common way to conduct early reconnaissance work and identify and prioritize projects. In the past, this assessment work could cost upwards of \$100,000 for a single project. Now it's down to about \$30,000 using this standardized method. The *RRN* has hosted gatherings to talk through "barriers to barrier removal" first with state agencies and then with local governments. As a result, it's now working directly with the states on typical problems like dealing with polluted sediment behind dams. Based on agency feedback, the *RRN* found 11 pathways where they can work together to tackle challenges.

Anthony Allen, from *Save the Sound*, an *RRN* member, said it best when he remarked how, “exciting it is to come together to push this work forward in a way that no single organization could manage alone. There’s a real sense of collaboration and progress towards having freer rivers and more resilient communities in the Long Island Sound region.”

The Long Island Sound Funders Collaborative knew that investing in this type of collaboration could pay huge dividends, and we pooled our resources to fund the early design and startup phases for this project. None of the Collaborative’s member funders could have funded this project on their own.