**Rivers of Politics: Venues and Coalitions in Northwestern Dam Removal**

**The Case of Savage Rapids Dam**

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### **Abstract**

River stakeholders are increasingly choosing to remove ageing dams from degraded rivers. Dam removal presents novel political challenges and opportunities for advocates on all sides of the issue. It is intensely controversial and poorly understood. Using the case of Savage Rapids Dam on Oregon’s Rogue River, I examine the advocacy coalitions, political venues, and ideological frames that are shaping the dynamic dam removal policy subsystem. Stakeholders used the dam as a proxy for their political values and cultural beliefs about land use. Faced with a virtually unprecedented decision about a complex landscape, actors pursued their goals in public, legal, and legislative venues at state and national levels. Dam retention advocates defended the dam based on an emotional attachment to the constructed landscape, but they had few strong political options as changing environmental policies empowered the pro-removal coalition. In the end, social and political pressures brought stakeholders into negotiations that satisfied most major stakeholders and resulted in dam removal.

Keywords: dam removal, advocacy coalition framework, venue shopping, framing, ecological restoration, salmon

### **Introduction**

The Savage Rapids Dam (SRD) was condemned three times before its removal. The Grants Pass Irrigation District (GPID) agreed to take out their dam in 1994, 1997, and 2001, but the structure wasn’t breached until 2009, after years of strife and uncertainty.

Dam removal is a dramatic and controversial choice for river managers and stakeholders. A novel phenomenon, it offers the environmental movement the opportunity to move from landscape conservation to active restoration. Nearly one thousand dams have been removed in the United States, the majority of them since 1999.[[1]](#endnote-1)Dam removal overturns the environmental and economic status quo, restoring some river functions while ending others. This trend represents a major policy change, one that is very likely to continue in the immediate future: pro-removal stakeholders are ascendant and 85% of American dams will be past their useful lives by 2020. The dam removal phenomenon is particularly important on the Pacific Coast. California, Oregon, and Washington have removed at least 55 dams since 1999, while the rest of the American West has removed seven.[[2]](#endnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-1) I apply Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to the removal of Savage Rapids Dam from Oregon’s Rogue River.[[4]](#endnote-3)

Rogue River stakeholders, challenged by regional and political changes, had fundamentally different understandings of rivers and dams, and framed the problem, the responsibility, and the solution in different ways – some were interested in the fish, some in the river, some in the community, and some in the dam itself. The river had formerly been sustained large salmon runs and then been utilized for irrigated agriculture. How a river should be managed is an evolving question in the 21st century. The environmental history of Southern Oregon, fraught with conflict and instability, created fertile conditions for a volatile political struggle. These conditions demanded advocates who could be creative and adaptable while levering the situation to further their goals. Savage Rapids Dam is the largest diversion dam to be removed on the West Coast.[[5]](#endnote-4)

### **Methods and Analysis**

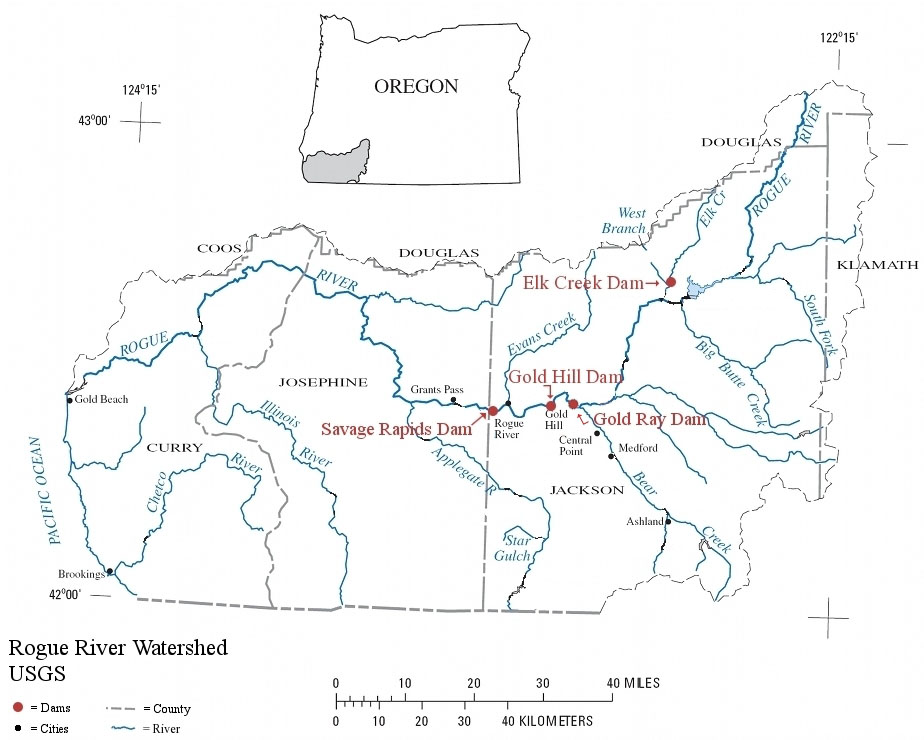
To understand northwestern dam removal politics I sought out large removals aimed at restoring native anadromous salmonids (*Oncorhynchus spp.*) – salmon and steelhead trout. Dam size is important because the larger a structure, the greater its impact upon its landscape and the greater its importance to its community in terms of water storage, economic production, and reservoir area. Larger dams are also more likely to yield broadly applicable lessons than smaller cases with simpler impacts and fewer stakeholders. Salmonid restoration has been the driver of some 90% of west coast dam removals.[[6]](#endnote-5) As charismatic, endangered, economically relevant species, salmonids will continue to be the central issue of regional dam debates for the foreseeable future. I further focused upon functioning dams; removals of abandoned or useless structures can be ecologically beneficial, but they do not carry much political, economic, or cultural weight. Savage Rapids was a large, functioning dam that affected several runs of anadromous salmonids. While all dams (and rivers) are unique, these features allow for better comparisons between Savage Rapids and other cases.

Each dam removal is the culmination of a political agenda, raised, negotiated, resolved, and implemented. The core of the agenda-setting process is the way that removal advocates navigate political institutions. My research focuses on coalitions, venues, and frames – who made the argument, where they made it, and how.

I began my research by interviewing key informants in the summer of 2011. I began by interviewing the dam owner and the most prominent removal advocate as reflected in the dam removal database kept by the NGO American Rivers, and then found other informants through snowball sampling.[[7]](#endnote-6)Speaking with representatives of all relevant groups, I constructed a coherent narrative of the dam removal, tracing the political process from the first appearance of the issue to the removal of the structure.[[8]](#endnote-7) I did this by synthesizing my interview results with newspaper records, meeting minutes, and other archived sources to find the role and contributions of each stakeholder group. I read each article about the dam removal in the local newspaper (the Grants Pass Daily Courier) from the 1970s to the 2009 removal. This allowed me to crosscheck my respondents’ accounts and to complete the narrative.

I examined the Savage Rapids Dam removal using ACF. ACF emphasizes five major points: The importance of scientific/technical information, the importance of evaluating change over at least a decade, analysis using the policy subsystem, the inclusion of all actors, and policies as indicating belief.[[9]](#endnote-8) My case study speaks to each of these points.

Dam removal is a novel phenomenon. Its policy subsystem is being shaped and reshaped, and so is particularly susceptible to external shocks and to structural changes. This instability results in policy events that challenge Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s 1993 ACF hypotheses, as alliances and attributes shift.[[10]](#endnote-9) Most importantly, the policy landscape has become much more receptive to dam removal in the 2000s than it was in the early 1980s.[[11]](#endnote-10) But there are few laws specifically addressing dam removal or ecological restoration, and while events like the Savage Rapids removal are building a new subsystem, in the short term advocates face an open and largely undefined political wilderness offering a wide range of legal and political venues. The story of dam removal politics is of creative stakeholders opportunistically using whatever allies and political levers they can find. This includes the involvement of many stakeholders who had had only passive interactions with the dam or the river. I discuss each coalition’s strategies and tactics as the Savage Rapids conflict expanded into new venues.[[12]](#endnote-11) Both sides pushed for conflict expansion at different times, forcing their opponents to fight on their terms. I also analyze the frames through which advocates understood and portrayed the issue. Conflicting frames created “policy paradoxes” wherein stakeholders looked at the same situation and saw different things.[[13]](#endnote-12) These clashes stemmed from coalitions’ belief systems, which presented the central challenge as stakeholders strove to resolve the conflict.



Map 1: Rogue River Watershed. Other dams were removed 2008-11. (Map courtesy Waterwatch of Oregon)

**Background**

The Rogue is the one of the largest rivers in Oregon, flowing 215 miles from Crater Lake National Park in the Cascade Mountains to the Pacific Ocean just north of the California border. Its watershed covers 5000 square miles of southwestern Oregon. The Rogue’s was one of the original eight rivers to gain Wild and Scenic status in 1968, and its upper and lower reaches are largely undeveloped. The Middle Rogue, including the larger communities of Grants Pass, Medford, and Ashland, contains most of the people in southwestern Oregon and is the most developed section of the river. The Rogue also has the state’s largest population of wild anadromous salmonids.[[14]](#endnote-13)[[15]](#footnote-2)

Savage Rapids Dam was the lowest dam in the Rogue River. Built on the border between Josephine and Jackson Counties (see Map 1), it was 39 feet tall when raised for the summer irrigation season (usually mid-April to mid-October). The dam’s sole purpose was to supply water to Irrigation District patrons in and around the town of Grants Pass, though the impoundment was used seasonally for flat-water recreation and occasionally as a convenient water source to fight forest fires.[[16]](#endnote-14)

The Grants Pass Irrigation District (GPID), covering 18,000 acres of southern Oregon, formed in 1916. The district built Savage Rapids Dam to supply its farms with water in 1921. The dam was greeted with great fanfare; the Grants Pass Daily Courier (GPDC) published many articles boosting the irrigation project, and followed the construction avidly.[[17]](#endnote-15) An editorial entitled “Water Everywhere” compared the people of the Rogue Valley to Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, bemoaning the fact that the Rogue’s waters ran, useless, to the sea.[[18]](#endnote-16) A crowd of 3000 turned out to watch the dedication ceremony[[19]](#endnote-17), and in 1922, the Irrigation District printed Christmas cards featuring their new dam.[[20]](#endnote-18) In 1929 the state of Oregon awarded GPID a water right of 230 cubic feet per second (cfs), an allotment of 1/80 cfs per acre.

There were problems immediately. As soon as the dam went into production, it pumped juvenile salmon into irrigation canals and spilled them onto the land – one farmer scooped hundreds of salmon fry out of his field.[[21]](#endnote-19) The dams’ turbines turned young fish migrating downstream into “fish salad”[[22]](#endnote-20), and the dam’s fish ladder delayed migration[[23]](#endnote-21), with attendant diminution of fitness.[[24]](#endnote-22) In 1934 a new ladder was built on the south side of the dam, but a 1941 investigation from the Oregon Game Commission found 14-38% mortality.[[25]](#endnote-23) By 1949, the cost of maintenance was onerous enough that GPID asked the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) to help repair the dam.[[26]](#endnote-24)Major repairs and fish passage issues continued through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) reports in the 1960s indicated that Savage Rapids Dam was the biggest fish passage problem on the Rogue.[[27]](#endnote-25) The label of “biggest fish-killer” would stick to the dam for the rest of its existence.[[28]](#endnote-26) In 1982, for example, 1,500 adult steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) were trapped due to faulty passage, prompting a rescue operation by GPID and ODFW.[[29]](#endnote-27)

During these years, the Rogue’s fish populations plummeted, like many throughout the Pacific Northwest. Commercial fishing ended in 1935.[[30]](#endnote-28) Sport fishing continued apace, but still populations fell. Development and bad ocean conditions are hard to control, but stakeholders could feasibly improve freshwater habitat. In 1955, the Oregon Water Resources Commission (OWRC)(the commission that sets OWRD policy) set minimum streamflow requirements to protect fish in state rivers. Fishing groups worked to restore fish passage and habitat – for example, the Rogue Flyfishers and the local chapter of Northwest Steelheaders, pitched in to help rebuild fish ladders in the 1980s – but such efforts did not come close to fixing fish passage problems.[[31]](#endnote-29) In the 1970s the Cole Rivers hatchery and Lost Creek Dam were built upstream, and the Rogue’s salmon runs artificially augmented with hatchery stock. This meant a rise in fish abundance, but at some ecological cost. The issue of hatchery vs. wild stocks remained (and remains) controversial throughout the region.[[32]](#endnote-30)

All the while, GPID was changing as well. In the 1930s its service area was cut to 12,600 acres in acknowledgement that roughly 6,000high elevation acres were not feasible to irrigate.[[33]](#endnote-31) By 1979, GPID only used about 170 of its allotted 230 cfs.[[34]](#endnote-32) In 1921 the Rogue Valley was an agricultural area, but over time the District’s patrons became more and more urban and suburban in character. The Grants Pass town slogan is “It’s the Climate,”[[35]](#footnote-3) and the dry, temperate conditions that had forced farmers to build an irrigation system began to lure retirees to southern Oregon.[[36]](#endnote-33) This is a growing trend for the rural west.[[37]](#endnote-34) GPID patrons subdivided their land to the point that the Irrigation District’s average parcel size was less than an acre, and by the 1980s very few patrons were farmers.[[38]](#endnote-35) Indeed, many patrons did not receive irrigation district water at all. As early as 1980, GPID board chair Paul Brandon told Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) Administrator Larry Jebousek that the board believed GPID was no longer “a viable irrigation district” and discussed converting it into some other more appropriate body for the new Grants Pass.[[39]](#endnote-36)

All of this set up a policy paradox: the Rogue River was two different things at once.[[40]](#endnote-37) To some it was a wild river that provided fish and to others it was a reservoir that provided irrigation water. It was other things too, of course, like recreation and scenery, but these other Rogue River goods did not conflict as directly as fish and irrigation diversions. The situation stayed relatively stable as long as the balance of political power and resource availability did. But fish runs dwindled, farms became subdivisions, the environmental movement rose, Savage Rapids Dam aged, and contrary demands and ideologies collided.

**The Issue Begins**

In the late 1970s the OWRD began to perfect GPID’s water right. The state’s survey revealed that GPID only irrigated about 7,755 acres. Oregon still calculated irrigation water at 1/80 cfs/acre, so in 1982 OWRD reduced GPID’s water right to 97 cfs.[[41]](#endnote-38)

The district had been concerned about this possibility throughout the proof process. The leakiness of their canals meant that in fact they needed far more – roughly 150 cfs – to push water out to the furthest ends of the district (See Map 2).[[42]](#endnote-39) So in the early 1980s, GPID worked out a deal wherein ODFW would apply for 83 cfs, to be delivered through GPID’s canals. The water would improve habitat in the canals and in connecting streams, recharge groundwater, and provide the necessary boost for GPID’s actual irrigation water.[[43]](#endnote-40) With this deal in place, the board withdrew an application to OWRD for further water appropriations.[[44]](#endnote-41) It is noteworthy that at this point, before Savage Rapids became a source of conflict, a resource agency made common cause with the irrigation district to help them keep their dam.

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Map 2: Grants Pass Irrigation District. Numbers represent divisions represented on the board.

The deal with ODFW raised one of the most difficult problems of the entire process: that GPID’s leaking canals created greener lawns. A dam is a machine that changes its landscape, and while most of the people in Grants Pass were not GPID irrigators, they benefitted passively by living in more verdant surroundings fed through the canals. This meant that many people saw SRD (and dams in general) as the creator and guarantor of beauty and civilization, making the otherwise arid Rogue Valley into a green paradise[[45]](#endnote-42), and even a Garden of Eden.[[46]](#endnote-43) A frequently-repeated story was that local Indians called the region the “brown desert”[[47]](#endnote-44) or “The Land of Little Brown Sticks”[[48]](#endnote-45), but that SRD had changed all that. A search in the Josephine County Historical Society Library turns up no evidence for any such appellation among the Rogue’s native tribes, but the popular perception of the dams and the irrigation district turning the Rogue Valley green (it is indeed quite dry for western Oregon, with 26-31 inches of precipitation annually[[49]](#endnote-46)) made a powerful and enduring policy image.

The water right partnership with ODFW ran until 1985, when ODFW determined that it could only prove beneficial useof about 20 cfs, and this only to particular streams.[[50]](#endnote-47) After two more years of discussion, ODFW director Randy Fisher stated that it was “important for us to keep in mind that DFW attempted to assist GPID in finding a solution to a very difficult problem (in the 1980 agreement)…DFW can legitimately appropriate only 20.5 cfs. I hope that we can put the 1980 agreement behind us…”[[51]](#endnote-48) This left GPID and its water right back where it had begun. GPID applied for an extra 90 cfs in 1987.

**The Josephine County Water Management Improvement Study**

The next year, BOR began what would becomethe Josephine County Water Management Improvement Study (JCWMIS), which included improving fish passage at Savage Rapids.[[52]](#endnote-49) The effort soon focused primarily on GPID, as Josephine County lost the funding that allowed it to take part in the study. Embracing the chance to solve (or at least delay) its problems after ODFW withdrew, GPID joined the project in 1988.[[53]](#endnote-50) In 1990 it was granted a supplemental water right to divert at historic levels on the condition that it continue to study better water management, with the goals of implementing conservation measures to lower consumption and solving Savage Rapids’ fish passage problems. Participation included a $25 charge for patrons. This provoked some grumbling but the study went ahead and the supplemental water right’s terms were fulfilled.[[54]](#endnote-51)

The perfecting of GPID’s water right gave environmental and fishing groups the opportunity to take a more active role in discussions over the fate of the dam and the water. There are few political opportunities for stakeholders to reassess old diversion dams.[[55]](#footnote-4) In early 1989, Waterwatch of Oregon (a group dedicated to instream flows), Rogue Flyfishers, and the American Fisheries Society met with OWRD to discuss their thoughts on appropriate permit conditions.[[56]](#endnote-52) As noted above, fishing groups had long taken an interest in the dam’s operations. But helping to fix a fish ladder and reducing a water right are different matters. In the meeting the District “learned that we were not going to be able to live with their comments.”[[57]](#endnote-53)

As the JCWMIS continued into the early 1990s, the situation was uneasy but relatively stable. The issue remained on local footing, as active environmental groups were either explicitly based in the Rogue Valley or were Oregon-specific bodies with strong presences in Jackson and Josephine Counties. Bob Hunter, a lawyer, boater, and fisherman from nearby Medford, represented Waterwatch. While an array of environmental and fishing organizations would eventually sign on to the effort, Waterwatch was their universally-acknowledged leader, speaking for all the private stakeholders that wanted to see the dam removed.[[58]](#endnote-54) Even after the issue had moved well beyond the Rogue Valley, a decade later, Hunter remained a central figure in the Savage Rapids debate.

The involvement of environmental groups brought GPID into the ideological battle that had been raging across the American West since the 1960s: how to use resources. One of Waterwatch’s slogans is “Rivers need water,”[[59]](#footnote-5) but people in Grants Pass asked, “How can they withhold water God gave us and let it run into the ocean?”[[60]](#endnote-55) Land and water use were being rethought in every landscape and industry in the region, as the growing environmental movement resisted the development of forests, deserts, and shorelines.[[61]](#endnote-56) America was adopting a more environmentalist outlook on everything, including dams[[62]](#endnote-57), and nationwide, policies on instream flows were trending towards Waterwatch’s beliefs.[[63]](#endnote-58)

Stakeholders had trouble adapting their mindsets. Oregon law makes river water a publicly owned good, but dam supporters saw the water as their own, to use as they saw fit.[[64]](#endnote-59) Supporters focused on the dam’s status as property, while removal advocates focused on the dam’s impacts on public resources like fish.[[65]](#endnote-60) Progress was challenging because antagonists were not talking about the same thing. This led to a long and difficult process, as both sides believed that their rights were under attack by their opponents. In another Stonian paradox, the dam was defended as private property by its defenders while environmentalists saw it as infringing on their rights to enjoyment of the river and its fish.

Waterwatch and its environmental and economic allies argued in terms of the fish and the river. The Rogue fishery had been devastated, and this dam was “the biggest fish-killer in the Rogue.” This label quickly became a rallying cry, and environmental groups used the phrase or some version of it consistently.[[66]](#endnote-61) Dam defenders protested at this, but the frame stuck – even when people denied that the dam killed fish, listeners could not help but think of dead salmon.[[67]](#endnote-62) As environmentalists saw it, the dam was built to provide irrigation water, which pumps could do without disrupting fish.[[68]](#endnote-63) It made little difference whether the fish were desired for recreation[[69]](#endnote-64), or business[[70]](#endnote-65), or for their environmental value. The dam was cast in terms of its harms (great) and its production (marginal, and easily replaceable). The dam removal coalition wielded technical knowledge to make their case. Arguments were in quantities: 114,600 more salmon, $5 million per year to the regional economy.[[71]](#endnote-66) The gain in fish would be a 22% increase, underlining the dam’s label as a killer.[[72]](#endnote-67)

At the same time, beneath their arguments was the fact that dams have long been powerful political symbols, for environmentalists as much as for irrigators. As Bernie Moore of Rogue Flyfishers and the Governor’s Task Force on Savage Rapids Dam said, “I have never been a fan of dams, period.”[[73]](#endnote-68) Dave Strahan, the area representative for the Northwest Sportfishing Industries Association (NSIA) and a Grants Pass native, was motivated in part by his lifelong opposition to Savage Rapids and the changes it wrought on the river.[[74]](#endnote-69) These men were not members of environmental action groups – they represented industrial and fishing interests in the removal coalition – but their core values were the same as the environmentalists’. Waterwatch’s campaign slogan was “Free the Rogue!”[[75]](#endnote-70) Here was no reference to increased salmon returns or whitewater rafting dollars, but a plea for an imprisoned river that deserved freedom as if it were a person. This sort of construct, redefining liberty to fit a river, is present in many dam removal campaigns.[[76]](#endnote-71) State and national environmental groups joined the Savage Rapids fight as part of a larger effort to remove dams and restore rivers nationwide.[[77]](#endnote-72) Early in the process, Savage Rapids was one of fourteen “damnable dams” listed by the Oregon Natural Resources Council as candidates for removal.[[78]](#endnote-73) A year earlier, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt publicly expressed the desire to blow up a dam and made something of a national dam removal tour in the 1990s, sledgehammer in hand.[[79]](#endnote-74) He stopped in the Rogue Valley in 1998 to help take out a small dam in downtown Medford.[[80]](#endnote-75) It was easy for state and national environmentalists to target it as one more instance of a destructive dam. At the same time, Bob Hunter’s effective leadership kept the Savage Rapids coalition from losing focus or direction despite the coalition’s national-level expansion.[[81]](#endnote-76)

The change from the vision of an irrigated paradise to one of “damnable dams” goes hand-in-hand with the rise of the New West, a social shift from traditional rural extractive industries to more diverse amenity-based economies.[[82]](#endnote-77) Indeed, Patagonia, Incorporated, an amenity-based company, was one of the earliest nonlocal stakeholders to support dam removal on the Rogue River.[[83]](#endnote-78) The scale and impact of the New West phenomenon is debatable, but the fact that such changes occurred in Grants Pass and in GPID is indisputable. When GPID was founded in 1921, it is unlikely that its patrons would have anticipated a post-agricultural era for the district, or that they would ever have considered a free-flowing salmon stream superior to one that was dammed, despite protestations from the fishing community when SRD was built.[[84]](#endnote-79) But salmon fishing is the sort of amenity that creates the New West. Faced with this new situation dam savers appealed to local Granges[[85]](#endnote-80), traditionally a potent source of political power in rural America.[[86]](#endnote-81) Dam savers met in Grange halls and gained support from rotary clubs[[87]](#endnote-82), but these organizations did not possess the political clout they might once have wielded, and their role was very minor.

The JCWMIS was split into a water conservation study, performed by David J. Newton Associates[[88]](#endnote-83), and a study on fish passage, performed by BOR. A progress report on fish passage was released in 1992 and the Planning Report/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was released to the public in 1994. Later that year, the OWRC extended GPID’s permit to 1999 under the condition that they implement the conservation plan and fix fish passage in accord with the EIS.[[89]](#endnote-84) BOR’s preferred alternative was to remove the dam and replace it with pumps.[[90]](#endnote-85) Seeing no way around OWRD’s demands and needing to keep their water, the GPID Board voted regretfully to remove the dam in January 1994.[[91]](#endnote-86) Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Mark Hatfield (R-OR) stood ready to appropriate funding for the project if stakeholders could come to a consensus on replacing the dam with pumps.[[92]](#endnote-87) The Pumping Alternative opened fish passage, was demonstrably cheaper for the District ($11.2 million to $17.6 million), and opened greater fishing and whitewater recreation opportunities: a significant economic boost to the local community.[[93]](#endnote-88) But the local community hated it.

**The Ghost of the Spotted Owl**

To a large extent this had nothing to do with the fish, the dam, or the river. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, dam removal was a minor environmental issue in the Pacific Northwest compared to the political Gottardammerung of the Spotted Owl. The story of the Owl Wars needs no retelling here, but the tensions and distrust they caused and exacerbated between communities, environmentalists, and government agencies, the battle lines they drew, and most importantly the political mindsets they created and entrenched, remained violently alive when dam removal came to the fore years later. In 2011 and 2012, stakeholders from the Savage Rapids debate spoke of the Spotted Owl as a touchstone in their political careers and consciousness.[[94]](#endnote-89) In 1991 Oregon Governor Barbara Roberts, replying to GPID secretary Bruce Buckmaster’s concerns about federal listings of Columbia River fish, assured him that “Like you, we do not want this to become another ‘Spotted Owl.’”[[95]](#endnote-90) Doubts and suspicions were pre-made, and when the issue politicized, the fish replaced the owl as the symbol of government meddling. As cast by local mayor Royal DeLand, “These people are just sick and tired of the government telling them what color toilet paper to use and when to use it.”[[96]](#endnote-91)

Further complicating matters was the mercurial history of upstream Elk Creek Dam, a structure started in 1982, as Reisner’s “Age of Dams” was coming to an end.[[97]](#endnote-92) Environmentalists fought against it through the 1980s. In 1987 they succeeded in getting an injunction that halted construction partway[[98]](#endnote-93), much to the chagrin of many Rogue Valley residents. Stakeholders on both sides of the issue lumped the survival of Savage Rapids and the completion of Elk Creek together through the 1990s.[[99]](#endnote-94) Elk Creek Dam was never completed, and in the end it was notched to provide fish passage in 2008.

The ghost of the Spotted Owl would continue to haunt negotiations over Savage Rapids for years to come. Environmentalists’ activities and fish interests’ and resource agencies’ long-term opposition to the dam stoked concern in the Grants Pass community, and dam supporters held candlelight vigils for SRD as early as the winter of 1991.[[100]](#endnote-95) Prominent in these efforts were property owners from along the seasonal Savage Rapids Lake. These people were not irrigators, but they enjoyed the existence of the lake and worried about their property values.[[101]](#endnote-96) A few businesses, such as RV parks, saw risks to their summer incomes as well.[[102]](#endnote-97) Dam savers organized into grassroots nonprofit groups like the Save Savage Rapids Dam Committee and the Three Rivers Watershed Council (TRWC), a series of public rallies catalyzed local opinion and took Savage Rapids Dam from a relatively private issue to a matter of public debate.[[103]](#endnote-98)

The public was far more exercised over the fate of the reservoir than the fate of the dam. Only irrigators would be materially affected by the dam removal, and their water was assured in BOR’s Pumping Alternative, but the seasonal “lake” would be impossible to replace. This issue was raised within the GPID board when the fate of the dam was debated. In a letter to their fellow board members, Catherine Davis and Bill Hiljus said “The dam has been a fixture in this community for many, many years and thousands of people have fond memories of family picnics on the summer lake, or learning to water-ski there, and of watching fish jump the ladders. Many people had also built boat docks on the lake, and enjoy the still water view during the irrigation season. These are the images that tug at our hearts.” In the rest of the letter they urged their colleagues to look instead at the facts laid out in BOR’s study, and reminded them that GPID did not exist to provide recreation.[[104]](#endnote-99) But to the candlelight protesters, recreation was exactly what GPID provided.

The controversy bonded together a broad coalition of recreationists, small businesspeople, and concerned citizens.The GPID Board maintained only loose connections to these groups – individual board members may have wanted to keep the dam, but the board needed to remain publicly neutral because of the terms of their supplementalwater right and their agreement to remove the dam.[[105]](#endnote-100) In 1994, Don Greenwood, formerly a member of the GPID board, resigned after the removal vote, joined the TRWC, and circulated a save-the-dam petition through the community, ultimately claiming to collect some 13,000 signatures.[[106]](#endnote-101) Few doubted that Grants Pass and Josephine County wanted to keep Savage Rapids Dam.

Keep it, but not pay for it. A survey of GPID patrons, reported by Bill Hiljus in late 1993, indicated that only 28% of patrons wanted to pay to save the dam.[[107]](#endnote-102)Hopes of funding dam retention through external means failed to gather momentum as a variety of local advocates took up the cause of dam retention but found no way to pay the $15-17 million that was then estimated as the cost of fixing fish passage.[[108]](#endnote-103) The Grants Pass Daily Courier’s headline summed up the situation nicely: “Dam fans scratch heads, raise fists.”[[109]](#endnote-104)

Pressed by anglers, environmentalists, and the state of Oregon, dam retention advocates reached for new weapons. The petition was having little direct effect, and the protesters found that they had no legal claim to the dam or the water. Popular discontent had promoted and enflamed the issue but had not moved it closer to any new resolution. Retention advocates attempted to recall what they saw as an insufficiently steadfast GPID Board. Previous GPID board elections had been quiet affairs, with little voter interest or turnout and board members essentially being appointed, or volunteering.[[110]](#endnote-105) The recall effort failed, but the politicization of board selection was a sign of things to come. In hopes of neutralizing environmentalists, an organization called The Association to Save Savage Rapids Dam and Lake (ASS), led by local Republican John DeZell, filed a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) against a long list of opponents, from Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt to local environmentalist Andy Kerr.[[111]](#endnote-106) The case was swiftly thrown out.[[112]](#endnote-107) The ideological slant of the suit is well expressed by legal analyst Phillip Berry: “ASS's SLAPP ‘may represent the high water mark of SLAPP litigation, being based, apparently, upon the theory that anyone who even speaks, however abstractly, about removing a dam . . . for whatever reason is subject to suit for alleged conspiracy.’"[[113]](#endnote-108)

To some extent the conflict was generational. Simply put, the Greatest Generation believed in dams.[[114]](#endnote-109) Many of the strongest voices in favor of Savage Rapids Dam were older people, known to GPID staff as “the W2 guys,” or the “Iwo Jima crowd,” who made their stands on principle without much reference to the specifics of Savage Rapids Dam.[[115]](#endnote-110) For 96 year-old former GPID board member L.H. Kirtley, “I don’t care where it is, to take out any dam…there’s no reason in the world.”[[116]](#endnote-111) CarlStein, who would later serve on the GPID Board, avowed that he was “not in favor of the removal of the dam under any circumstance.”[[117]](#endnote-112) Core values, held by local leaders who had grown up in a far more rural Rogue Valley, were difficult to shift with promises of future salmon runs. The dam meant more to them than 150 cfs of diverted water.

**Turning to Salem**

Hope for Savage Rapids Dam came in the form of the Gingrich Revolution - a classic external disruption in the ACF. The 1994 Republican resurgence reached the Oregon state legislature, where Grants Pass Republican Brady Adams was elected as president of the senate. Feeling that local people were being pushed around by outsiders – a common point of view in Grants Pass – Adams threw his support behind the dam.[[118]](#endnote-113) A popular, influential local banker, he was the ideal figure to represent the dam retention coalition in the state capitol. Joined by fellow Grants Pass Republican Rep. Bob Repine, Adam tried to create a legislative solution, pushing through bills guaranteeing GPID 150 cfs (SB 1005), and making dam removal subject to the approval of the legislature before being ordered by any state agency or local government (SB 1006). Adams also engineered Senate JR-12, forbidding agencies (like OWRC) from adopting any administrative rule without the legislature’s consent. This vigorous expansion to a state-level venue gave hope to pro-dam interests in Grants Pass, but it put control in the hands of Brady Adams and the rest of the Oregon government.

During this time GPID’s sentiment was all for keeping the dam, but legally it still had to prove due diligence in pursuing dam removal in order to keep its supplemental water right. This conflict was demonstrated in a pair of letters from GPID board chair Tom McMurray to Congressman Wes Cooley (R-OR). The first letter, written February 16, 1995, noted the board’s decision to remove the dam, and said that when they had a working group together to remove the dam they hoped for his support in securing federal funding. No one is carbon copied on the nine-line letter.[[119]](#endnote-114) Five days later, McMurray wrote another letter to Congressman Cooley, this one two pages long, with copies going to Brady Adams, Bob Repine, and the GPID Board. Here McMurray admitted frankly that his previous letter was only sent to fulfill their due diligence clause, stated that the funding help they really wanted was to keep the dam, and hoped that GPID would get help from Salem.[[120]](#endnote-115)

**The Task Force**

In Salem the dam retention effort ran into Governor John Kitzhaber, a staunch environmentalist with a “Take Out Savage Rapids Dam” bumper sticker on the wall of his office.[[121]](#endnote-116) Kitzhaber’s belief in dam removal created a political wall for dam savers to try to surmount. Kitzhaber vetoed Adams’ bills, putting the situation at an impasse. Law and economics were clearly on the side of dam removal, but with local sentiment dead against it, funding the removal would be impossible. GPID could not realistically have paid for removal or mitigation on its own. Kitzhaber decided that the matter needed more time, and he and Adams re-wrote SB 1006 to create a task force on Savage Rapids Dam.[[122]](#endnote-117) The governor and the senator appointed the task force’s members in January 1996. The group consisted of some local agency and environmental representatives, such as Bob Hunter, and a large proportion of Grants Pass citizens, some of whom had previously advocated keeping the dam.

In ACF terms, this was an effort to forge one coalition out of the many Savage Rapids stakeholders, in hopes that they would overcome value-based differences through discussion and mutual education, and produce a plan on which all could agree and in which all could believe. This is a relatively common strategy in western land issues.[[123]](#endnote-118) It has seen some successes, notably northern California’s Quincy Library Group.[[124]](#endnote-119) One coalition, one venue, one plan. It would circumvent the conflict – if a good plan could be made.

The working of the governor’s task force counted as due diligence to OWRD, so GPID was able to keep using water as it previously had. After some delay, the task force set to work under the chairmanship of Dennis Becklin, a local businessman, recreational fisherman, and associate of Brady Adams.[[125]](#endnote-120) Becklin emphasized the need to ensure that all task force members were educated on the issues.[[126]](#endnote-121) The task force took advice from professionals in many relevant fields, from ecology to engineering. Members were deeply concerned about the possible release of contaminants from behind the dam, and while a series of studies indicated that the SRD silt load was clean, this fear would continue to dog the removal even well after the dam came out.[[127]](#endnote-122)

In December 1996, the task force released its recommendation, stating that while Savage Rapids Dam was indeed a problem for fish, it should be retained with rebuilt fish ladders.[[128]](#endnote-123) However, the recommendation was messy and inconclusive. Michael Evenson of ODFW and Al Cook of OWRD signed with the understanding that their agencies would not be obligated to provide resources in the future.[[129]](#endnote-124) Costs also worried Gordon Anderson, the mayor of Grants Pass, and he signed with the statement that he was concerned about the expenditures of taxpayer dollars without (in his view) sufficient demonstration of need.[[130]](#endnote-125) Emerson Roller of Grants Passand Lyle Woodcock of the Josephine County Farm Bureau refused to sign at all, believing that more study of fish mortality at the site was needed – they did not think that BOR’s estimates, based on results from other North American rivers, were convincing.[[131]](#endnote-126) Bob Hunter, Bernie Moore of Rogue Flyfishers, and fisherman Dale Smith wouldn’t sign the document for the opposite reason – for them, removal was the only acceptable option.[[132]](#endnote-127) All of this was consistent with previous stances, as expressed in comments on the BOR EIS. Kitzhaber did not accept the Task Force’s finding. The mega-coalition, never very solid, broke into pieces.

The upshot was that the Task Force changed almost nothing, serving only to prolong the debate and inflame public opinion on both sides.[[133]](#endnote-128) GPID tried to work through diverse visions of the dam’s future by bringing in the Rogue Valley Council of Governments (RVCOG) to facilitate discussion, fact-finding, and (potentially, eventually) funding. RVCOG is an apolitical group incorporating 22 (as of 2012) governmental or quasi-governmental organizations in the Rogue Valley.[[134]](#endnote-129) RVCOG met with GPID roughly once a month through 1997, but the attempt to build consensus and move toward a decision did not work in the volatile political climate. Adams would introduce similar legislation later, but with no great likelihood of success.[[135]](#endnote-130) The dam savers had little chance of winning with John Kitzhaber in Salem, but as they faced a near-certainty of failure if they kept playing under OWRD’s rules, they did not have much choice.

**The SONCC**

While Kitzhaber’s environmental values or the divided nature of the task force report may have played a role in his rejection of the recommendation, another external change collided with the Task Force’s decision – the 1997 federal listing of the Southern Oregon Northern California Coho (SONCC)(*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) salmon. This would have come as no surprise to Task Force members, who were informed about the potential listing by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) personnel well before it happened.[[136]](#endnote-131) It was a time when the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was tipping the political balance on rivers all over the region. Between 1995 and 2000, 30 salmonid runs were listed on the West Coast.[[137]](#endnote-132) GPID had been concerned about listings as early as 1991.[[138]](#endnote-133) The listing supported environmentalists’ contentions about the dire state of Rogue River fish, making NMFS into an ally and federal court a promising venue.[[139]](#endnote-134) In ACF terms, the beliefs of NMFS and the federal government were now aligning more closely with the beliefs of environmentalists and fishing interests. The presence of a threatened species and the fact that the dam’s operations now constituted a taking permanently moved the parameters of the debate.

Nonetheless, emboldened by the task force’s recommendation and by local agitation, in July 1997 the GPID Board voted 3-2 to keep SRD, reversing its 1994 decision.[[140]](#endnote-135) The OWRD and the ESA are not pliable opponents, however, and there was no apparent way for the board to overcome them. Two weeks later, after some agonizing, board member Bill Braunberger changed his mind, presciently stating that he saw nothing but litigation and attorney expenses for years into the future if they continued to defend the ageing dam.[[141]](#endnote-136) The board rescinded the dam-saving vote 3-1, board member Sam Attolico having died between meetings. These shifts, based on the comings and goings and learning of individual board members, reflect the complicated position of the GPID board in relation to the advocacy coalitions. Every other stakeholder group approached the issue and joined coalitions based entirely on their values. The Board, pushed and pulled by legal obligations, economic realities, public opinion, the desires of district patrons, and members’ individual beliefs, maintained an uneasy position throughout the issue, tied in different ways to each coalition and shifting with external pressures.

The next week, the board formally voted to rescind its July decision to retain the dam. At this, dam supporter Marjorie Spickler (the lone vote to keep the dam) made a statement worth quoting in its entirety as a remarkable example of the ideology guiding part of the debate:

“You all know that there is more involved here tonight than just water and the fish and I am thankful that the people that are sitting around this table weren’t part of our founding fathers or we would all be a British Colony. Before the vote, I would like to recall [indecipherable][[142]](#footnote-6) memory of the 40’s. He said when Hitler went after the Polls, he didn’t protest, because he wasn’t Polish. When Hitler went after the Germans, he did not protest, because he was not German. When Hitler went after the Christians, he did not protest, because he was not a Christian. When they came after him there was no one to protect him. We have the very same situation developing with this type of a meeting this evening.[[143]](#endnote-137)

In the interim, dam removal advocate Leon Guillotte took Attolico’s seat. Dam supporters, undaunted, began an effort to recall board chair Tom McMurray. Formerly a strong supporter of the dam, McMurray had voted for removal, believing that there was no way to counter the effect of the SONCC listing.[[144]](#endnote-138) Dam supporters criticized him for caving in to OWRD and Waterwatch.[[145]](#endnote-139) The recall was successful. Don Greenwood, who had circulated the Save the Dam petition, replaced McMurray on the board.

Spickler’s reference to Hitler was not unusual. Dam opponents were regularly described as Nazis during the course of the SRD controversy; they were “throwbacks from the Hitler and Imperial Japanese regimes,”[[146]](#endnote-140) and their tactics had “the markings of Karl Marx and of Joseph Goebbels of Nazi Germany.”[[147]](#endnote-141) These insults were rarely aimed at specific people or organizations. Groups, like Waterwatch were not publicly called Nazis, but they were labeled as “wild-eyed environmentalists from San Francisco and Los Angeles,”[[148]](#endnote-142) and their credentials as environmentalists called into doubt. “So-called environmentalists,” it was said, were trying to remove Savage Rapids Dam, for nefarious reasons all their own.[[149]](#endnote-143) The rhetoric was that “We should save the dam just to help save America.”[[150]](#endnote-144)Such a “devil shift” whereinopponents are harshly vilified and their power exaggerated, is discussed in ACF work by Sabatier, Hunter and McLaughlin.[[151]](#endnote-145) Casting an opponent as a pantomime villain may be an effective tactic to unify and inspire a coalition, but it is unlikely to create an efficient or amicable solution. Without much of a technical or scientific defense available, dam savers spoke of vague conspiracies, an old tradition in American politics.[[152]](#endnote-146)

The involvement of agencies from Salem and Washington, and of national environmental groups, allowed dam savers to cast their opponents as wicked outsiders interfering with local matters. While this view is current in many places, it is particularly strong in Southern Oregon, which has long perceived itself as separate from the rest of the state. With the counties of northernmost California, with which it shares a distinct history, geography and political culture, Southern Oregon semi-seriously identifies as the State of Jefferson, a mythical 51st state separate from faraway Portland or San Francisco. The movement to create an actual state was last active in the 1940s, but the sentiment and trappings remain, and the green Jefferson flag is commonly seen between Grants Pass and Yreka, CA.[[153]](#endnote-147) There are crosses on the Jefferson seal indicating that Jefferson has been “double-crossed” by the government, a sentiment strongly present in comments about dam removal and the Rogue River.

A suspicious attitude even extended to other parts of the Rogue Valley. Bob Hunter of Waterwatch, who lived in Medford, was still seen as an outsider.[[154]](#endnote-148) This may be partly due to the historic atomization of Rogue Valley society. There is little connection between the upper, lower, and middle Rogue, a subtle but important issue in forging land-use consensus.[[155]](#endnote-149) Grants Pass is only 87 miles from the river mouth at Gold Beach, but it takes three hours to drive there – longer than to far-off Eugene.[[156]](#footnote-7) Even within the Middle Rogue Valley, people from the liberal enclave of Ashland are seen as hippies and Grants Pass conservatives are called Cavemen.[[157]](#endnote-150)[[158]](#footnote-8)

All of this put government agencies in a difficult political position. Agency missions may be expressions of values, but these missions and their emphasis within agencies have changed dramatically in recent decades, leaving personnel to adjust as best they can.[[159]](#endnote-151) Agency representatives did not advocate publicly for anything beyond their findings and the fulfillment of their agencies’ missions. When the Task Force released its recommendation of dam retention, all agency representatives signed it. But agencies’ findings and missions tended to put them on the same side as the environmentalists, and as the political pressures surrounding GPID’s water right and the SONCC were decidedly in favor of dam removal, dam savers vilified the agencies as well as the environmentalists.[[160]](#endnote-152) This transition away from the days when ODFW went out of its way to help GPID keep its water right is representative of the broader embrace of environmental goals by land and resource agencies.[[161]](#endnote-153) While NMFS and OWRD could not really stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Waterwatch, people felt that they did.[[162]](#endnote-154)

To some extent this view of agency belief in dam removal was accurate. One agency employee, unnamed but frequently cited, referred in an email to himself and his colleagues as “dam busters.”[[163]](#endnote-155) He was quickly corrected, but the political damage had been done.[[164]](#endnote-156) The move from managing to conserving resources, noted above, was driven partly by the arrival of personnel raised and trained in a multiple-use, environmentally conscious world.[[165]](#endnote-157)It is notable that several resource agency representatives, who have taken part in a variety of dam removal negotiations, display concrete chunks of these dams prominently in their offices.[[166]](#endnote-158) Jim Martin, head of ODFW’s fisheries division, spoke openly of his goal, supported by the agency’s mission, to take out dams; the Grants Pass Daily Courier said that he had a “hit list.”[[167]](#endnote-159) But such frankness was rare – Martin had the authority to be a wholehearted advocate of dam removal, but in general agency personnel had walked a thin political line.[[168]](#endnote-160)

**The Dennis Becklin Board**

Task force chairman Dennis Becklin continued to take an interest in GPID, attending GPID board meetings (which were open to anyone) and speaking out publicly on the issue. Casting doubt on the GPID board’s confidence and on the numbers the district used to calculate their costs, he began to promote himself as a potential board chair and the man to solve GPID’s problems. [[169]](#endnote-161) As a prominent local businessman and an associate of Brady Adams’, Becklin seemed to have the expertise and relationships in place to resolve the dam issue. In September, Becklin and Marjorie Spickler sued the irrigation district and the three individual board members who had voted against dam removal, alleging conspiracy. The suit went nowhere, but it distinguished Becklin as someone to take GPID in a new direction. As the debate boiled on and letters to the editor of the Grants Pass Daily Courier grew increasingly passionate, Curry, Jackson, and Josephine Counties endorsed the effort to save the dam, crystallizing local support for SRD.[[170]](#endnote-162) In November, Becklin and staunch dam supporter L.H. Kirtley were elected to the GPID Board by wide margins.[[171]](#endnote-163) In the same month, OWRD amended the 1994 water right, setting out timelines for GPID’s progress.

In the first GPID board meeting of 1998, Dennis Becklin grasped GPID’s “helm with an iron hand.”[[172]](#endnote-164) He presented the board with a new mission statement incorporating the non-irrigation amenities provided by Savage Rapids Dam and calling the distribution of irrigation water “an inviolable community trust vested in GPID by its patrons and by the community at large.” Becklin asked each GPID employee for “total dedication to the cause.” He committed to “open a constructive dialogue”[[173]](#endnote-165) between GPID and NMFS and OWRC “with the open aim of preserving current water rights while staving off demands for dam removal.”[[174]](#endnote-166)Becklin was named the sole spokesman for the district.[[175]](#endnote-167) Becklin fired GPID’s longtime lawyer, Jack Davis, and replaced him with his own attorney, Chris Cauble.[[176]](#endnote-168) The new board voted to inspect the dam and fish passage facilities daily, in an effort to operate the structure for optimum passage as well as its other functions. Board meetings were moved from once a month to once a week.[[177]](#endnote-169) Two weeks later, GPID terminated its relationship with RVCOG, deciding to handle the issue by itself.[[178]](#endnote-170) Going forward, Becklin would refer to “this board,” distinguishing it, and its way of doing business, from its predecessors.[[179]](#endnote-171) The Becklin Board (Becklin, Kirtley, Spickler, and Greenwood) had engaged in significant policy learning, particularly through Becklin’s experience on the Task Force, and they felt strongly equipped to move forward.

Legally, GPID’s commitment to dam removal stood, and when the task force study ended in 1997, GPID had to show OWRD due diligence in pursuing removal. In January 1998, GPID petitionedfor a contested case hearing to push OWRD’s deadline back and give the board more time for studies. This they received, and GPID went ahead with studies of potential dam upgrades, hoping for funding through Brady Adams.[[180]](#endnote-172) But on April 17, 1998, the Oregon Water Resources Commission denied GPID’s water right. GPID appealed, the case went to the Oregon Court of Appeals, and the water kept flowing. GPID, knowing that it had no better a case than ever, asked for an extension nine times without filing a brief.[[181]](#endnote-173) This somewhat ridiculous situation having become clear, the Oregon Court of Appeals finally denied GPID’s petition in November 1998.[[182]](#endnote-174)

GPID railroaded itself when it first tried to keep its water right. The hope, as expressed in Tom McMurray’s letter (quoted above) was that they would hold on and wait for legislative victory, keeping the water and the dam. GPID could not realistically win in court. In the end, the water right battle served only to inflame tensions in Grants Pass. It was expensive, contentious, and time-consuming without moving the issue forward. With no other choices, the District looked to the Oregon Supreme Court, but before the Court could hear the appeal, the conflict changed to focus on the SONCC.

With a federally listed salmon swimming through their fish ladder, Becklin and his board had to contend with NMFS.GPID hired Cramer Fish Sciences to ascertain the level of Coho mortality at the dam. Cramer found almost none[[183]](#endnote-175), but was criticized for incomplete methodology.[[184]](#endnote-176) The question of how much of a fish-killer SRD really was remained a matter of some debate.[[185]](#endnote-177)

In late 1997, GPID hired Harza Engineering to help form their Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) and set about re-engineering SRD fish passage.[[186]](#endnote-178) There followed a messy process wherein the GPID Board, led by Becklin, attempted to shore up fish passage more or less unilaterally, and present their plans to NMFS.[[187]](#endnote-179) NMFS, unimpressed, repeatedly pointed out the inadequacies of GPID’s plans in an increasingly exasperated correspondence and emphasized that dam removal remained the best way to avoid being fined for illegal take.[[188]](#endnote-180) Becklin fired back some defiant letters and forged ahead.[[189]](#endnote-181) While GPID was unquestionably active in monitoring and working on fish passage, their work was not to NMFS’s specifications. In April 1998, NMFS filed an injunction against GPID.[[190]](#endnote-182)

Fighting NMFS and OWRD was expensive, and again GPID looked for more money. The lakeside property owners, having as much to lose as anyone, seemed a possible source, but GPID had no leverage to extract money from non-patrons, and the property owners’ commitment to the coalition dissolved. In the late summer of 1998, the Board made a supplemental assessment, asking patrons for an extra $20/acre. This, on top of the risk of losing the water right, provoked a backlash against the board and Dennis Becklin.[[191]](#endnote-183) Becklin’s personality and leadership style created strong opinions in almost everyone who met him,[[192]](#endnote-184)[[193]](#footnote-9) and while he inspired some people, he infuriated others. People criticized his “swaggering, publicity seeking and publicly antagonistic behavior.[[194]](#endnote-185)” They resented paying more for what they believed to be an emotional crusade.[[195]](#endnote-186) Becklin’s public statements were cautious and equivocal, but he was widely considered to be a champion of keeping Savage Rapids Dam.[[196]](#endnote-187) Some believed that his interest in Savage Rapids came because he owned property downstream of the dam site and therefore enjoyed good fishing and a quiet river.[[197]](#endnote-188) Another recall effort, aimed at Becklin and his allies, began in the summer of 1998.[[198]](#endnote-189) GPID, always in a tenuous political position, now split into factions, with a vocal group of patrons advocating the removal of the dam to secure the district’s irrigation water. Among them were some of the largest irrigators left in GPID.[[199]](#endnote-190)

**The New Old West**

GPID’s transformation into a collection of hobby farms and half-acre lawns may have lengthened and complicated the process.[[200]](#endnote-191) Few GPID patrons really needed the water, and this freed those who favored the dam to fight beside Dennis Becklin on ideology alone. Had GPID’s patronage depended on cheap water for their economic livelihoods, they might have struck a deal sooner and secured that water, whether delivered by pump or dam.[[201]](#endnote-192) The larger remaining irrigators – a golf club, a vineyard, and a cemetery (a very New West set of businesses) – opposed the effort to keep the dam and lobbied to retain the water as cheaply as possible.[[202]](#endnote-193) To them and to some candidates for the GPID Board the issue was the water, not the dam.[[203]](#endnote-194)

While environmentalists often oppose traditional extractive economies, in Grants Pass it was the irrigators who sided with them, and many of the newcomers siding with the dam savers. These hobby-farming retirees, while new to Josephine County, brought along their generational conservatism and pro-dam ideology.[[204]](#endnote-195) These were Robbins’ amenity-driven migrants, but among the amenities they enjoyed were quasi-natural flatwater recreation (“Our beautiful dam with a big lake”[[205]](#endnote-196)) and groundwater recharge provided by GPID and SRD.[[206]](#endnote-197) Such people were not invested in the irrigation district as such, and state Representative Dennis Richardson (R-Central Point) would later distinguish between the dam savers and the district savers.[[207]](#endnote-198)

The belief in the dam as a productive part of the landscape may have been why many people refused to believe that the dam killed fish.[[208]](#endnote-199) This, the crux of the dam removers’ argument, did not resonate with people who had watched the fish “taking their time,” and swimming up the fish ladders.[[209]](#endnote-200) Indeed, SRD’s fish ladders were something of a tourist attraction. To Grants Pass, the ladders visibly worked, and therefore the environmentalists must have had some other reason to want the dam out. Dam defenders needed visible evidence of dead fish, which for them meant bodies of adult salmon.[[210]](#endnote-201) Early in the debate, the Three Rivers Watershed Council spoke of getting their own engineering and environmental assessments to prove that the dam was not a fish killer.[[211]](#endnote-202) The impacts of delay on salmon populations and the destruction of smolts on their downstream migration (confusinglyreferred to by Bob Hunter as “invisible fish”[[212]](#endnote-203)) were not an effective part of the discussion. But the dam’s identity as a fish killer with terrible passage was a policy core belief for the removal coalition, and they would not yield on the point. For the dam savers the fish passage was a secondary belief, one from which they eventually retreated as the board actively tried to repair fish passage under Dennis Becklin. Later, the coalition got with its own science in the form of the Cramer study on juvenile mortality, but it made little difference.

A group of patrons called Citizens for Responsible Irrigation (CRI) vocally criticized Becklin and his board for fighting a quixotic and expensive battle that could result in the end of the Irrigation District.[[213]](#endnote-204) The board backed down, tiering the supplemental assessment, which brought in less revenue while doing little to mollify CRI or anyone else.[[214]](#endnote-205) Patrons began to buy out of GPID, prompting the district to sue them, and later to change its rules to make it difficult for them to leave.[[215]](#endnote-206) Concerned GPID patrons reported Becklin’s somewhat ad hoc fish passage engineering work to the Oregon State Board of Examiners for Engineering and Land Surveying (OSBEELS) for falsely claiming to be an engineer.[[216]](#endnote-207) This micro-issue hardened lines in GPID – some patrons were for Becklin and the dam, some against him. In November 1999, Judy Gove, a leader of CRI, was elected to the GPID board on a dam removal platform.[[217]](#endnote-208)

**Resolution**

In 1998 the parties were ordered into mediation by Judge Michael Hogan of the Ninth Circuit – another forceful attempt to build one coalition, force consensus, and create a negotiated agreement.[[218]](#endnote-209) After closed-door negotiations (the dam was no longer an allowable subject at GPID board meetings) and relative calm, Becklin seized the initiative in July 1999 and released his own plan for dam removal. The plan was so broad and expensive – it included subsidized electricity for the pumps and $10 million to build a riverside recreation area including a water slide – that many did not believe it to be a legitimate offer.[[219]](#endnote-210) Rather, Becklin’s plan was seen as more of a shield behind which dam retention advocates could fight after environmentalists and agencies rejected it. At the same time, SRD’s pump system broke down, to the dismay of patrons.[[220]](#endnote-211) The dam was becoming a financial liability. The removal plan was put to a vote of GPID’s patrons in January.

The patrons, heartily sick of the conflict and the legal fees, supported the plan, 1821-1088.[[221]](#endnote-212) Becklin was told that according to GPID’s bylaws the board chair could only sit for two years.[[222]](#endnote-213) Don Greenwood replaced him, and shortly thereafter, Becklin resigned from the board.

Waterwatch and its allies, armed now with evidence that 63% of GPID patrons favored dam removal, pressed the removal case.[[223]](#endnote-214) Greenwood’s stance had moderated during the long process, and under his leadership the board worked amicably with Waterwatch. In 2001, all parties – GPID, NMFS, OWRD, BOR, and Waterwatch – signed a Consent Decree in Governor Kitzhaber’s office, declaring the end of the dam and the intention to move, as one, toward removal. The emotionally-driven dam savers who valued the lake and recreation had no political choices available to continue the fight. While many people in the community still wished to keep the dam, the Consent Decree enforced consensus and allowed stakeholders to frame themselves as one united coalition, which politicians and the public could view with favor.[[224]](#endnote-215)

The next step was to gather funding from the federal government, and so the Oregon delegation, which had been aware of developments in Grants Pass throughout the debate, was asked to introduce legislation in support of the Consent Decree. One stipulation of the Consent Decree was that GPID had to hire lobbyists to better secure that funding, and the District engaged Ball Janik, a Portland and Washington, DC law firm. While Ball Janik went to work, national environmental organizations with a stronger presence in Washington than Waterwatch stepped forward to lobby for dam removal, and American Rivers, the World Wildlife Fund, and Trout Unlimited, organizations that had long supported the effort, all contributed. There was also lobbying by economic dam removal advocates from the NSIA and local fishing interests like Curry Anadromous Fishermen.[[225]](#endnote-216) Looking to expand the coalition, GPID sought support from such industry bodies like the Oregon Water Resources Congress and the National Water Resources Association.[[226]](#endnote-217) The stakeholders presented Congress with a united front.

This proved to be wise, as Congress presented its own challenges. There was uncertainty – dam removal was not well established and some members of Congress were skeptical – but there was little outright resistance (Giguere and James 2012). Senators GordonSmith (R-OR) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) introduced various versions of The Rogue River Restoration and Grants Pass Irrigation District Improvement Act several times before the bill was passed in 2003. The Oregon delegation supported the effort using frames that appealed to each side’s values. Senators Smith and Wyden and Representatives Walden, and DeFazio, in a letter to John Ashcroft, Gale Norton, and Josh Bolten, asked for $8 million in President Bush’s 2006 budget, saying “The Savage Rapids Dam Consent Decree stands as a unique example of how natural resource disputes can be resolved in a way that keeps the local agricultural community viable, while achieving important goals for the restoration of anadromous fish runs.”[[227]](#endnote-218) For Republicans, the Act secured irrigation water for farmers, and for Democrats, it restored the Rogue River ecosystem. As Wyden said: “The funding is a tribute to a community that came together to find a win-win solution for fish and farmers.”[[228]](#endnote-219) It is likely that Wyden and his colleagues, who had been aware of the SRD debate for nearly a decade by then, knew that there were almost no farmers in the district. But casting the bill as a defense of farmers likely made the deal more palatable to colleagues who represented more agricultural irrigation districts. The American Farm Bureau stayed neutral, if not supportive.[[229]](#endnote-220) While all stakeholders lobbied, much credit went to GPID secretary/manager Dan Shepard, whose testimony and personal presence made a strong positive impression on lawmakers and agency personnel, in Salem and when he went to Washington DC to represent the District.[[230]](#endnote-221)

The fight for funding took years. The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) had pledged $3 million for dam removal in 2002, demonstrating the state of Oregon’s earnest support of the project. This counted heavily in Washington DC.[[231]](#endnote-222) Providing added motivation, OWEB’s money was not available until the actual structure was being removed.[[232]](#endnote-223) Appropriations came in drips for studies and pump installation in 2004 and 2005, but in 2006 President Bush’s budget included $13 million to fund the act. $15 million came the next year, the pumps were installed, and in the summer of 2009 Savage Rapids Dam was removed. In 2010, Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*) spawned in the former reservoir.[[233]](#endnote-224)

The story of the Savage Rapids Dam removal, seen through an ACF lens, presents a variety of indications about the future (and present) of American dam politics. Scientific and technical information are used as political ammunition, but in familiar landscapes like reservoirs, people may refuse to believe in problems pointed out by scientists. The policies of the many interest groups involved in the issue are likely to indicate belief, and when they do not, as in the case of several GPID board members, political discontent and disarray follow. Stakeholders whose beliefs are not represented by their organizations are likely to engage in the political process by joining or even founding an advocacy organization that does reflect their beliefs. This leads to a wide array of framing efforts complicating and extending the issue – note organizations like Three Rivers Watershed Council, begun by disgruntled members of the Grants Pass community. While such organizations faced limited political options, they contributed to pushing the debate from Grants Pass to Salem. The American political system offers a huge array of venues and ways to access power; actors found opportunities and limits for dam removal in many places. All these problems are present in 2013 for rivers like the Snake[[234]](#endnote-225), the Klamath[[235]](#endnote-226), and the Sacramento.[[236]](#endnote-227) In the evolving dam removal policy subsystem, in internal and external flux, the inclusion of all actors and a broad perspective on stakeholders will be necessary as the issue continues to expand in the future.

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53. GPID Board meeting minutes 3/8/88 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
54. GPID Board meeting minutes 12/28/90, 2/28/91 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
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116. Kirtley, LH, GPID Board, personal communication 8/24/11 [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
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119. McMurray, T. to W. Cooley, 2/16/95, in GPID Board meeting minutes [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
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148. Gregory, G. (1993, December 15) GPID hears tough talk on Savage Rapids. *GPDC,* pp. 1A, 2A. [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
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163. Hamilton (2011)

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164. Fisher, W. in Duewel, J. (1999, December 7) Dam supporters come out in force. *GPDC* pp. 1a, 2a. [↑](#endnote-ref-156)
165. Clarke and McCool (1996) [↑](#endnote-ref-157)
166. Brewitt, P., Personal Observation [↑](#endnote-ref-158)
167. Associated Press/GPDC (1991, February 7) Savage Rapids Dam on state official’s hit list. *GPDC.* [↑](#endnote-ref-159)
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