

Protecting Clean Water Together: Trouble With Dams

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Photo of DL&W tracks hanging in the air after wash-out at Devil's Hole. Taken during fly-over by U.S. Army Signal Corps - August 1955. Notice remains of culvert at the base. (From Kim Williams collection)

August is the month old-timers in Monroe County, PA, remember the Flood of 1955.

Some were youngsters then, and remember family members being cut off, stuck in cars or taking shelter where they could, unable to get to or from Stroudsburg. Others were old enough to take part in the vast clean-up, bulldozing mountains of debris, helping people who were stranded, searching for victims.

Between August 11 and 20 that year, back-to-back hurricanes pummeled our area. Nearly 20 inches of rain fell. The Brodhead watershed was awash.

Dams had failed along every creek. Old mill dams, swimming hole dams, fishing dams, "official" dams, structures of earth, wood, rocks and boulders gave way, carrying tons of wreckage downstream.

The rain abated, and the stormwater started to recede. But the worst was still to come.

Up near Mount Pocono, the Devils Hole Creek was trapped behind the 50-foot high railroad embankment. A culvert, which normally let the creek pass through,

had become blocked by debris. Floodwaters rose and rose, filling the creek valley like a lake — “stumps and tree limbs were bobbing at eye level,” one horrified eye-witness said — until the enormous earthen wall, overwhelmed, gave out. Now a monstrous torrent, the debris-laden water roared downstream carrying everything in its path, pounding down the Paradise to the Brodhead and into Stroudsburg.

More than 100 people lost their lives in the Delaware River basin, 76 of them along the Paradise and Brodhead Creeks. We’ll never know how many were lulled into false security as the flood waters at first seemed to subside — only to return with a vengeance with the failure at Devils Hole.

Today, there is hardly a small run or creek in the Brodhead watershed that flows freely, un-dammed, from its headwaters to its mouth. Some dams are monitored and maintained. Most are not.

Managing stormwater is the responsibility of local municipalities. Dams and impoundments fall under a patchwork of local and state authorities. To keep yourself and your family safe, make sure your township or borough requires new development to manage stormwater responsibly. Abide by stormwater guidelines on your own property. Keep drainage swales clear of debris. Advocate for removing old, unused, unsafe impoundments. And keep an eye on the weather.

Did You Know?

Floodwater erodes creek banks, injures aquatic habitats, spreads contaminants, and can foul both water and soil. “Green infrastructure” can help keep stormwater under control. Learn more at <https://brodheadwatershed.org/green-infrastructure/>

The 1889 Johnstown Flood in western Pennsylvania took 2,208 lives. The Flood of 1955 affected the entire northeastern U.S., well into New England. In 1972, Agnes racked up \$2.1 billion in damages, the costliest hurricane in U.S. history at the time, with much of the devastation in Pennsylvania. This storm season, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and other states have already suffered deadly flooding.

The stormwater management plan for the Brodhead and McMichael Creeks is at www.mcconservation.org under “Act 167 Stormwater Management.”

Brodhead Watershed Association protects water quality and quantity throughout our area. Get involved! Become a member! www.brodheadwatershed.org