



# Friends of the Fox River

## *FoxFacts: Fox River Dams*

**River** \Riv"er\, n. [F. riv[`e]re a river, LL. riparia river  
1. A large stream of water flowing in a bed or channel and emptying into the ocean, a sea, a lake, or another stream; a stream larger than a rivulet or brook.

The Fox River originates in southeastern Wisconsin, near Waukesha. It travels 70 miles through Wisconsin and an additional 115 miles in Illinois before joining the Illinois River at Ottawa.

**In Illinois, 13 dams impede the Fox River's flow.** From north to south, dams are located at: McHenry, Algonquin, Carpentersville, Elgin, South Elgin, St. Charles, Geneva, Batavia, North Aurora, Aurora, Montgomery, Yorkville and Dayton. It is estimated that more than 50% of the Fox River's surface area in Illinois is impounded by dams.

**Most Fox River dams serve no purpose.** Many dams' origins date to the 1800s, when the Fox River Valley first was settled. Dams were built at that time to power mills and generate electricity for the surrounding communities' needs. Although many dams have been rebuilt, few serve their original purpose and exist only because a dam has "always been there."

**Fox River dams do not "improve fishing."** Dams block fish movement. But rather than improving fishing, as many fishermen believe, dams impair the long-term health of fish populations. They prevent migrations vital to reproduction and do not allow fish to move away from unsuitable conditions. According to the [Fox River Fish Passage Feasibility Study](#), published in 2003, dams restrict the distribution of 30 species of fish native to the Fox River, including sauger, skipjack herring and speckled chub, as well as bigmouth, black and smallmouth buffalo.

**Fox River dams degrade water quality.** The impoundments (pools) behind dams have a less diverse animal community and poorer water quality relative to free-flowing portions of the river. For example, impounded portions of the river have fewer species and individuals of fish, and daily dissolved oxygen levels are more likely to be below Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA) standards at impounded sites.

**Fox River dams create unsafe conditions.** Any body of water can be dangerous. But dams create even greater risks by blocking the river's flow and forming deep pools with hazardous currents. As the river current's pent-up energy spills over the dam, treacherous "boils" form at the dam's foot. These rolling currents often are referred to as "drowning machines."

**Fox River dams do not control flooding.** Flooding is a natural occurrence in all river ecosystems. Other than McHenry, Algonquin and Dayton, no dam on the Fox River contains mechanisms to control water flow during storms.

For more information on dams and river health, visit [www.friendsofthefoxriver.org](http://www.friendsofthefoxriver.org)