

# Conservation

A Free-Flowing Rogue River/By Glenn Zinkus

## Free-flowing at last.

The dams on the Rogue River are coming down. By the end of 2010, a two-decade-long effort will have culminated in the removal of four dams, opening up 157 river miles to passage for the river's famous salmon and steelhead runs.

Author Zane Grey, who bought a cabin on an old mining claim at Winkle Bar, wrote about the wildness of the Rogue River. In his *Tales of Freshwater Fishing*, the chapter "Down River" tells

the story of fishing and running the Rogue. During the same decade that Zane claimed his piece of the river and chronicled his adventures, Grants Pass Irrigation District constructed Savage Rapids Dam to satisfy the irrigation needs of a thirsty West. Additional dams would soon follow.

The Gold Hill and Elk Creek dams came down in 2008. Gold Hill was the first significant dam removal and kicked off restoration of stream flows, contributing to future increases in the numbers of salmon and steelhead swimming the river. After Savage Rapids, Gold Hill Dam was the second-largest barrier to salmon and steelhead migration on the Rogue. The notching of the Elk Creek Dam on a Rogue tributary at its junction with the river provides direct passage to prime coho salmon spawning waters.

The widely heralded demolition of the Savage Rapids Dam in 2009 represents perhaps one of the greatest dam-removal victories in the United States. Fish passage had never been easy since the 39-foot-high, 500-foot-wide dam first blocked the Rogue. The original structure included a fish ladder, and a second fish ladder was added on the opposite side in the 1930s. Both ladders proved to be inadequate. The north-side ladder only operated during the irrigation season and had poor attraction flows; the south-side ladder suffered poor attraction flows that were difficult to regulate. At times, upstream fish passage was totally blocked. Pump screening has always been an issue as well. The pumps essentially operated unscreened for more than 50 years. Even after recent improvements, screening was still inadequate. Savage Rapids Dam has been replaced with an irrigation pump system.

Gold Ray Dam is the last dam scheduled for removal. When it comes down, the Rogue River will again flow wild and free for 157 miles from Lost Creek to the Pacific



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Ocean. Gold Ray, a derelict relic of past hydroelectric efforts and inactive since 1972, is a major liability to its owner, Jackson County. Safety concerns have blocked public access to land planned for a recreational park. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife lists Gold Ray Dam fifth on dam-removal projects for fish-passage improvement. Federal stimulus dollars are helping by providing the necessary funding for removal of this dam.

Negative impacts from dam removal have been both minor and temporary. The most notable is the release of gravel and sand that have built up in the reservoirs over the years. The Rogue experiences a short period of turbidity during the initial breach of any of the dams. For example, the sediment behind Savage Rapids Dam is composed of sand, gravel, and small percentage of silt. The silt is rapidly flushed through the river, and the sand and gravel moves through the steep gradients of the Rogue over the course of between one and five years. These sediments actually create new gravel bars and classic fishing water downstream of the original dam locations.

Never before have so many dams been removed from one river system in such a short time period. The removal of these dams contributes to the restoration of a premier salmon and steelhead river. There is new access for anglers and more good fly water. The newly exposed original reservoir channels behind Savage Rapids Dam now provide classic steelhead fly water, exposing the pools and riffles for the first time in generations. There is new bank access along long-submerged channels, new water to float, and access to previously closed public land and prime riverfront. All of this benefits anglers and provides a much-needed boost to Rogue Valley businesses by increasing economic activity to the tune of an estimated \$5 million per year.