Savage Rapids Dam

By Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife

The first dam across the mainstem of the Rogue River was built in the late 1880s to provide the town of Grants Pass with power and water. Shortly after the turn of the century, two more dams were built on the Rogue. In 1902, Dr. D.R. Ray started building the Gold Ray Dam a few miles below the town of Rogue River. That same year, the Golden Drift Mining Company built Ament Dam to serve the Dry Diggings Mine a few miles upriver of Grants Pass.

The Ament Dam proved immensely unpopular with some locals. Long-time resident Glen Woolridge remembered that the “old Ament Dam was really an abortion. The salmon piled up below it and wouldn’t go through the dark tunnel of a fishway. It destroyed more salmon than the commercial fishermen ever caught.” In 1912, saboteurs dynamited the dam, causing a serious break on the south shore. The dam owners repaired the controversial structure soon after the sabotage, only to have a state fish warden dynamite a wing dam a few years later. In 1921, the entire structure was removed to make way for the Savage Rapids Dam.

Like Ament Dam, Savage Rapids Dam, located a few miles upriver from Grants Pass, proved to be a contentious project. Much larger than its predecessor, the impact of this thirty-nine-foot irrigation dam on salmon runs became apparent almost immediately after its construction in 1921. Despite improvements over the decades, neither the dam’s fishways nor the screens on the irrigation intakes have ever proved satisfactory. In the 1970s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that 22 percent fewer salmon returned to the basin as a result of the dam.

In 2001, the Grants Pass Irrigation District agreed to dismantle Savage Rapids Dam, ending years of conflict with environmentalists over the aging structure. Funding for removal is pending.


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