

Hardwick wrestles with the future of one of its ailing dams

Vermont Public | By **Abagael Giles**

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SLR Consulting / Courtesy

The Jackson Dam in Hardwick is one of many dams in poor condition around the state. It was first built to pool water to support a hydroelectric dam downstream in Wolcott. Dams like it have been allowed to sit in disrepair for many years, but that's poised to change next year.

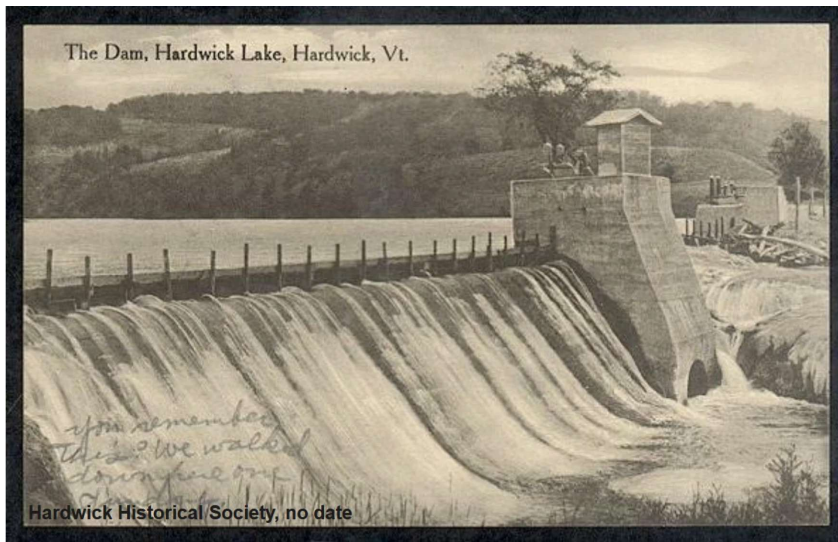
The Jackson Dam, which holds back the Lamoille River to create Hardwick Lake, has been in disrepair for more than two decades. Its face is cracked, and at least one of those cracks may go clean through to the other side and undermine the foundation.

It's a story familiar to many Vermont communities — a dam that helped to

the money to fix it, least of all the small municipal utility that owns the facility.

“I don't think anybody said when they built the dams, like, what's going to happen in 100 years? ... These dams have been referred to as utility assets,” said David Upson, the town manager in Hardwick. “They’ve quickly become utility liabilities.”

Historically, state regulators have inspected dams and documented structural problems — even rated them as unsafe — but lacked the funding, the staffing or the enforcement power to make dam owners tackle repairs.



Hardwick Historical Society / Courtesy

The Jackson Dam was built in 1920 and repaired in the 1950s. Even that last repair job is now failing, and the structure has a “poor” safety rating from Vermont’s Dam Safety Program.

That’s about to change next year, thanks to [a law passed in 2024](#) in response to the devastation wrought by flooding in recent years.

Vermont is overhauling its dam safety rules, and soon dams will be held to stricter safety standards. Regulators will also be forcing owners to fix structures that are deemed unsafe.

Dam owners will soon have access to a lot more state money to repair or remove dams, but it’s unlikely it will be enough.

As those changes loom, Hardwick is one of many communities around

A fix for flooding?

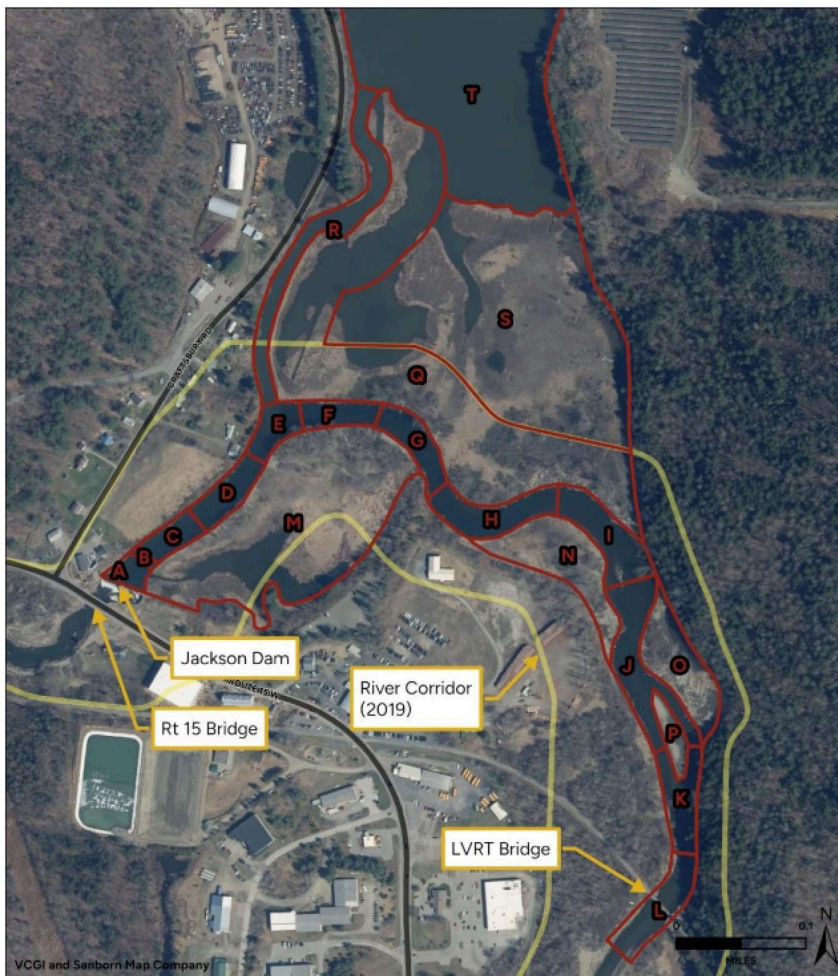
The state first documented the Jackson Dam's structural deficiencies at least 15 years ago. It's considered a "significant hazard" dam, meaning if it were to fail, it would damage public infrastructure and private property downstream. Absent repairs, state regulators have recommended the dam be operated at a lower water level year-round — but that was never supposed to be a permanent solution.

Vermont is seeing more extreme rainfall due to climate change, which makes the conditions that lead to floods more common. Hardwick has flooded four times in the last 15 years, and during that time the dam overtopped twice, though town and utility leaders say it's incredibly unlikely the concrete structure would fail catastrophically.

When the new regulations go into effect, Hardwick officials expect to be confronted with two choices: remove the dam or repair it.

Removing the dam would eliminate Hardwick Lake, turning it back into a wetland complex and floodplain.

But it would also lower floodwaters by a matter of feet in some parts of Hardwick village, according to a [flood modeling report](#) commissioned by the Lamoille County Planning Commission last year.



SLR Consulting / Courtesy

As Hardwick looks for ways to protect its downtown business corridor from future floods, removing the Jackson Dam offers concrete improvement. A separate analysis found doing so could lower floodwaters by at least a few feet in parts of the village.

Upton says residents are torn between preserving the lake and wanting to protect part of their downtown from a future flood.

“This is a cyclical conversation,” Upton said. “It coincides with flooding events. Everybody’s like, ‘Oh, what are we going to do?’ And then as the years pass by and there’s no flooding, people kind of forget — especially something with an \$8 million price tag.”

If the dam were to stay in place, Hardwick Lake could stay intact, but the structure would need costly repairs. Consultants haven’t yet crunched the numbers on how much the work would cost up front or in ongoing maintenance.

Many involved with the project expect regulators with the state's Dam Safety Program won't allow dam owners to take a "do nothing" approach for much longer.

Finding the money

An analysis by the engineering firm SLR Consulting commissioned by the Caledonia Conservation District estimates removing the Jackson Dam would cost between \$4 million and \$9 million — more than the town of Hardwick's annual budget.

A big part of the cost is from dealing with sediment, [between 600,000 and 2.5 million cubic yards](#) of which are estimated to have piled up behind the dam over the years.

It has to be removed or secured in place to prevent damage to the river ecosystem downstream. If it's clean of toxins, that could be straightforward. But if it proves contaminated, the expense could jump.

Consultants at SLR estimate that removing all of the sediment could cost as much as \$50 million. Instead, the firm is recommending that if Hardwick opts to remove the dam, it tries to stabilize as much of the mud in place as it can.

Right now, Vermont maintains a small fund of about \$250,000 for emergency dam repairs. Starting in 2027, that pot of money will be a revolving fund of \$4 million, which towns will be able to borrow for repairs and removals.



SLR Consulting / Courtesy

A 2001 dam safety inspection found major structural issues with the dam, including this large horizontal crack.

Still, that figure is only a fraction of what dam owners will need to spend across the state in the years ahead.

“There’s not enough money in there [the dam safety revolving fund] for even, you know, a portion of the Jackson Dam work that needs to be done for removal or repair,” said Karina Daly of Vermont Natural Resources Council and the Vermont Dam Taskforce, which helps communities find funding for removals.

Town Manager David Upson says towns can apply for federal hazard mitigation grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Fundraising can support smaller projects.

He doesn’t expect local taxpayers to be enthused about financing the project.

A regulatory Catch-22

And while dam removal has its perks — it eliminates the ongoing cost of maintenance, could improve flood resilience in Hardwick’s downtown and would restore an estimated 40 miles of fish passage — it’s very possible regulators won’t allow Hardwick Electric to foot the bill.

Scott Johnstone, the general manager at Hardwick Electric, says the utility’s hands are tied.

The Public Utility Commission is charged with making sure utility investments are fair and reasonable for ratepayers. Hardwick Electric serves ratepayers in 11 towns, of which Hardwick is just one, so removing the dam could put many customers in the position of paying for a project that only benefits a few.

“We have these old legacy dams that were built for one purpose but don’t serve them anymore, there is an open question about who can pay for maintenance today, and so we’ve got to solve that problem,” Johnstone said. “How much can we spend as an electric utility to maintain the infrastructure if it doesn’t have anything to do with the generation of electricity anymore?”

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doesn't have anything to do with the generation of electricity anymore?"

Scott Johnstone, Hardwick Electric

He says several other town utilities are in similar boats, even if the dams in question are smaller. At Greensboro's town meeting in March, residents aired their concern about the Caspian Lake dam. In Glover, the dam at Shadow Lake faces challenges, as does the one that forms Lake Elmore in Morrisville.

"I'm not sure anybody wants to pay for it," Johnstone said of the needed repairs and removals. "That's one of the challenges. We've got to be in that mode of trying to find the dollars that do exist."

If Hardwick does remove the Jackson Dam, it will be one of the largest and most expensive dam removals undertaken in Vermont to date, says Daly with VNRC.

The project could be a harbinger of what's to come, as many of the hundreds of state-regulated dams across Vermont face heightened scrutiny and their owners come under regulatory pressure in the coming years.

Hardwick's select board asked SLR to refine a cost estimate and list of potential next steps to remove or repair the Jackson Dam at a special meeting in late March.

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