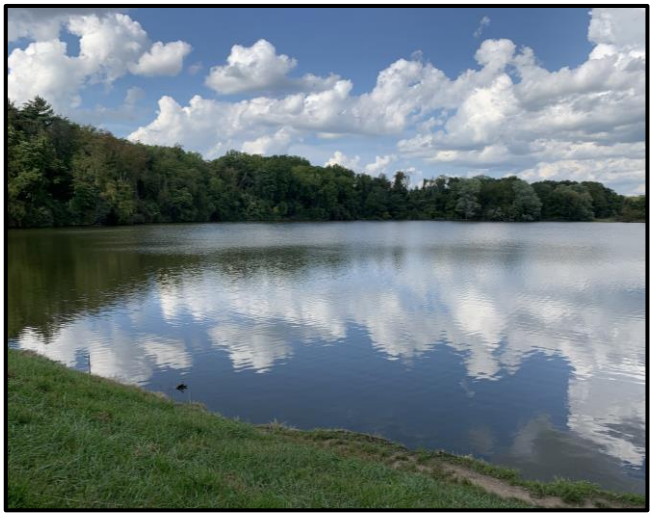
The Case for Reinvesting in the Upper Hocking Watershed

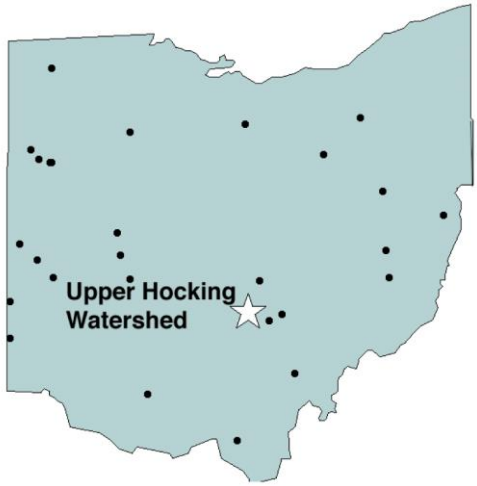


The Situation: Pilot Project Dams Are Reaching the End of Their Useful Life in a Watershed that has Evolved from an Agricultural Use to an Urban Use.

When Ohio was first settled, it was largely agricultural based, but quickly evolved into an urban and industrial state. This evolution has created many infrastructure demands.

When the dams were built, the watershed was predominately agricultural with the city of Lancaster near the lower end of the watershed. Over the next 60 years the watershed has changed to predominately urban or unincorporated residences. Since the late 1950's when the structures were built approximately 50 percent of the farm land has been lost to development.

Over the years the dams provided the flooding protection as they were designed. They were designed for a 50-year life of providing sediment storage and they are reaching the end of their useful life. The smaller dams were designed with corrugated steel risers and outlets and the aging steel is corroding. The concrete in the larger flood retarding dams continues to deteriorate and must be repaired or replaced.



The Upper Hocking Watershed is one of 27 watershed projects in Ohio. Over 55 watershed dams have been built in Ohio, many of them which have reached the end of their useful life

Project Description

- **Number of dams:** 28
- **Project start:** 1955
- **Project end:** 1961
- **Primary Purpose:** Control gully erosion, flooding and sediment damages
- **Population served:** More than 40,000 people in the local area plus tourists and others for recreation

Partners:

- Hunters Run Conservancy District
- Fairfield Soil and Water Conservation District
- Natural Resources Conservation Service

The area around the dams provide wildlife habitat and hunting and fishing opportunities at Hunter's Run Dam 4 and ODNR's Rock Mill Lake and Greenfield Lake.

The structures have been a part of the landscape for so long that many people have forgotten that they are there. The last disastrous flood to the west side of Lancaster was in 1948.

The City of Lancaster and surrounding area continues to be protected and benefit from the installation of these dams

Upper Hocking: An Investment Worth Protecting

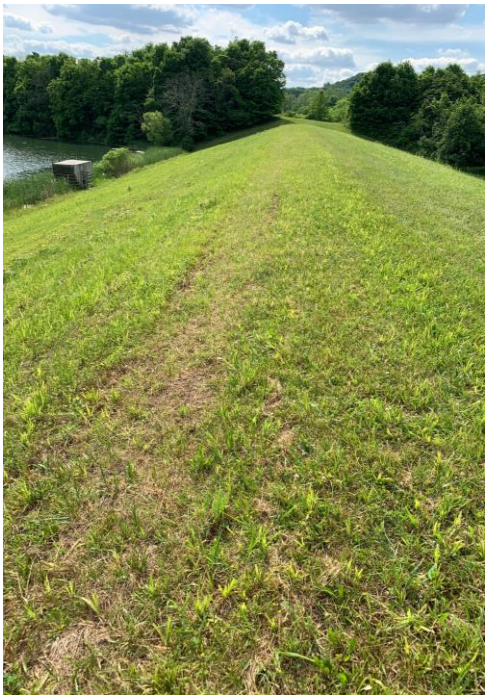
Congress invested over $12 million (current dollars) in the construction of the Upper Hocking Watershed Pilot Project. The local sponsors and landowners, over the years, have supplemented that $12 million, in conservation practices, and maintaining the project structures. The District currently spends approximately $195,000 per year maintaining and improving the structures.

Those dollars come from a special assessment to those residences and businesses in the affected area. The County and City also contribute to the maintenance costs.

New Opportunities

The Upper Hocking Watershed was undertaken by the local community to reduce damages from flooding and sedimentation. The project has protected farmland, roads, bridges, houses and commercial property. The need to prevent floods, reduce sedimentation, assure safe roads and protect the new development is as important today as it was 60 years ago.

In addition to continuing to reap these long-standing benefits, a mix of upgrading opportunities could offer new benefits to the community such as more recreation, rural fire protection, cleaner water, and protecting and creating wildlife habitat for a more diversified environment in a quickly developing watershed.



Planning for the Future

An organized approach is needed to analyze the extent of repair and rehabilitation needed, to prioritize those with greatest need, and to make the necessary repairs or improvements.

Hunter's Run Conservancy District is actively seeking additional funding and support for the much needed engineering assessments necessary to identify the modifications that are required to meet current dam safety standards. Many of the smaller dams require replacement of the corrugated steel risers and outlets.

Current farming practices that were developed as part of this original project have reduced the loss of valuable topsoil and eliminated the severe erosion of gullies. Engineering assessments are required to determine if all 28 of the District's dams are still needed. The studies could allow some of the smaller dams to be decommissioned to allow reallocation of those funds to the larger flood control dams.

This watershed is located in one of the fastest growing counties in the state. The dams have done an excellent job of protecting downstream property from flooding. The area is rapidly changing from largely agriculture to largely urban. This increases our need to keep the dams operating.