



# OHIO STREAM MANAGEMENT GUIDE

## Stream Debris and Obstruction Removal

A Proactive Landowner's Guide to Maintaining a Free-Flowing Stream

Guide No. 18

### PREFACE

Over the years, Ohio citizens have frequently contacted the Department of Natural Resources seeking assistance in the resolution of problems they have encountered related to water resources. One of the most common concerns raised by private landowners involves the situation in which trees and other debris accumulate in stream channels and obstruct streamflow through their properties. These obstructions, sometimes referred to as logjams, may become large enough to disrupt existing drainage patterns and contribute to flooding. In-stream debris often gets lodged behind bridge and culvert openings, which can cause higher flood levels and result in additional land inundation and property damage. Some streams also serve as recreational boating resources, and logjams may interfere with canoeing or other small watercraft navigation. This fact sheet poses some of the frequently raised questions regarding logjams, and provides responses from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

### WHAT IS A LOGJAM?

A logjam is any woody vegetation, with or without other debris, which obstructs a stream channel and creates a backwater condition. Logjams occur naturally, providing beneficial stream structure and cover for fish and wildlife and allowing nutrient-rich sediment to be deposited on adjacent floodplains. However, Ohio's streams are also expected to function as efficient drainage outlets, conveying water off the land in a timely manner. Logjams may inhibit this drainage function.

### DO LOGJAMS CONTRIBUTE TO FLOODING?

Yes, especially during small-scale floods. Since a logjam and the backwater pool created behind it take up volume in the stream channel or floodplain, less natural storage is available when a flood event occurs. This can elevate the level of small-scale flood events, those that occur several times a year. Such impacts can be significant to farm fields and residences in the floodplain and to particularly low-lying, flood-prone areas. A logjam can also lengthen the duration of inundation during these floods, which can have a significant impact on crops planted in floodplain fields.

The amount by which a logjam reduces the floodplain's natural storage capacity is inadequate to make a significant difference in flood elevation during large-scale flood events. Thus, removing logjams is generally not considered an effective measure to mitigate large-scale floods. Large-scale flood events can create, relocate, or enlarge logjams, though, by carrying debris from the floodplain into the stream channel and blocking bridge and culvert openings, resulting in localized impacts.

### HOW DOES A LOGJAM FORM?

A logjam most commonly forms when a relatively large object, often a tree that has fallen into a stream channel, becomes wedged or blocked across the streambed. Sometimes human activities induce stream obstructions, like when trimmings from tree pruning or large appliances and other litter are dumped in a stream or left in a floodplain and subsequently are carried into the stream by high water. When

an object obstructs the channel, it slows the flow and creates a pool of water behind it. As the water slows or stops behind the object, sediment suspended in the water settles out. The deposited sediment adds to the obstruction and causes additional debris to be trapped on and behind it. As more sediment and debris accumulate around and behind the obstruction, the logjam becomes larger and more tightly packed, forming a natural dam across the stream.

### WHY SHOULD LOGJAMS BE REMOVED?

The formation of a logjam is a natural phenomenon and there are beneficial as well as detrimental impacts. A logjam provides structure and cover for fish and other aquatic organisms. The pool created behind the logjam provides critical aquatic habitat during low flow conditions, and the stirring and mixing oxygenates the water as it cascades over, around, and through the logjam.

A logjam may also negatively impact the stream. A tightly packed stream obstruction can act as a barrier to fish migration. Other problems caused by logjams are more insidious. A stream's energy is naturally channeled toward the route of least resistance, which is often around the obstruction. As the stream's flow is directed around an obstruction, it scours away the stream bank until a new channel is created. As the stream flows in its new channel around the logjam, it is re-directed toward the opposite bank. This begins a process, depicted in Figure 1, in which the stream's energy is directed subsequently from one bank to the other as the water flows downstream, eroding the stream banks and undercutting riparian vegetation as it creates a series of meanders. In an undeveloped watershed, where the streamside vegetation

on a newly cut channel is similar to the vegetation on the original channel, such meandering and channel relocation is not really a problem. In a developed watershed, where the streamside vegetation consists of a narrow corridor with adjacent farm fields and housing tracts, stream meandering and relocation can inflict considerable riparian property damage and also degrade the quality of the stream habitat as the limited riparian habitat is destroyed.

## IS THERE A GOVERNMENT AGENCY RESPONSIBLE FOR REMOVING LOGJAMS IN ORDER TO KEEP OHIO STREAMS FREE FLOWING?

No. Governmental entities at the municipal, county, state, and federal levels have the statutory authority to undertake stream clearing and drainage improvement projects, but no governmental entity at any level has been assigned by statute the responsibility for such logjam removal activities. For more information on legal responsibilities regarding logjams see Guide 02, Who Owns Ohio Streams? The Ohio Department of Natural Resources recommends that, before an obstruction removal project is begun, there should be consultation with the applicable local, state, and federal regulatory agencies listed in Guide 06, Permit Checklist for Stream Modification Projects. The extent of permit requirements will depend on the location and design of the particular project.

Technical, educational, and other assistance may be available for obstruction removal projects. Township trustees, county engineers, soil & water conservation districts, conservancy districts, local emergency management agency and floodplain management coordinators, and staff with The Ohio State University Extension may all be possible sources of information or assistance to individuals. State agencies (e.g., the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency) and federal agencies (e.g., the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service) may also provide assistance to organized groups.

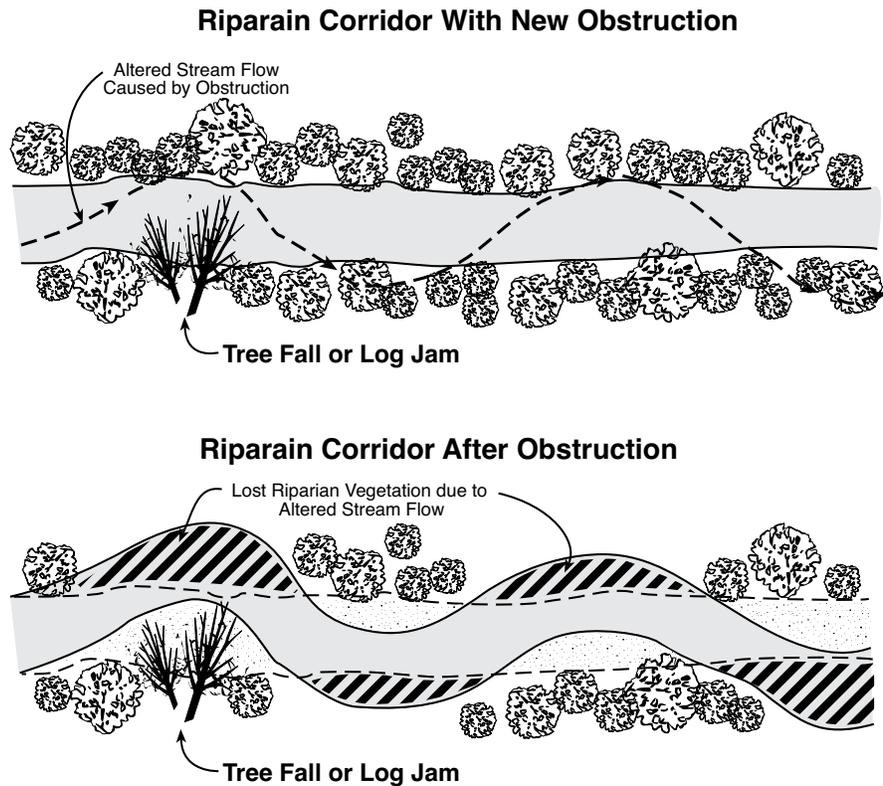


Figure 1. Effects of Obstruction on Riparian Corridor

Successful logjam removal projects have been undertaken in Ohio on many streams, some by volunteers and others using state and local appropriations and/or landowner assessments.

## ARE RIPARIAN PROPERTY OWNERS REQUIRED TO REMOVE LOGJAMS FROM STREAMS ON THEIR PROPERTY?

Landowners generally are not required by statute to remove logjams from streams on their properties. Statutes do exist that grant county commissioners (Ohio Revised Code § 6151.14) and township trustees (Ohio Revised Code § 505.82) the authority to remove stream obstructions on private property and charge the costs of removal back to the property owner; however, these statutes are rarely used. The common law also does not specify that landowners must keep the streams flowing through their properties clear of natural obstructions. An obstruction to streamflow on one property can result in damages to upstream properties by reducing the stream's capacity for conveying runoff, contributing to flooding,

or reducing the effectiveness of artificial drainage systems. Landowners have the right to pursue civil litigation for damages to their property caused by the unreasonable actions of others, but it is unclear whether a landowner's inaction in failing to remove natural stream obstructions could be successfully litigated. For more information on this subject, see Guide 02, Who Owns Ohio Streams?

While they are not required to remove logjams, landowners can contribute to the stability and overall health of their streams by proactively removing obstructions to flow. Such activities, especially on streams with limited riparian habitat, help maintain the multiple use nature of streams for fish and wildlife, drainage, recreation, and other purposes. A regular program for stream maintenance and obstruction removal may alleviate the need for a large, expensive channel restoration project later on.

## HOW SHOULD IT BE DETERMINED WHAT ACTIVITIES ARE NEEDED ON A STREAM?

The easiest way to deal with log-

jams is to remove them before significant sediment and debris has been deposited. Riparian landowners should conduct routine stream inspections twice a year to identify fallen trees and other debris on their properties that need to be removed from the stream and floodplain. Special inspections should be made following large storm events, during which debris is commonly deposited. A volunteer organization could be formed to undertake annual stream walks or canoe trips of the entire stream (with landowner permission and support) to identify obstructions that need to be removed, develop a work plan of needed activities, and perhaps even assist landowners in the obstruction removal. Such a group can serve a valuable function to riparian landowners by building support throughout the watershed for a regular inspection and maintenance program.

## HOW SHOULD STREAM OBSTRUCTIONS BE REMOVED AND WHAT TOOLS ARE NEEDED?

Fallen trees and other debris in the floodplain should be removed, buried, or secured as soon as possible. Fallen trees and other debris encountered in the stream should be removed at the earliest appropriate time. Standing trees should be left as they are. All debris should be buried, secured, or removed from the floodplain so that it won't be re-deposited during the next flood. Debris removal should be conducted only during low flow periods, which typically occur during late summer, autumn, and winter. Small debris can be removed from the channel without any tools or equipment. Larger logs and trees across the channel will need to be cut into manageable pieces and dragged out of the stream. Accumulated sediment can be raked and grubbed to remove vegetation. Large equipment should not be placed within the stream channel. Any disturbed areas along the stream channel should be seeded immediately to avoid unnecessary streambank erosion. If stream bank erosion has already occurred where a logjam has been removed, bank stabilization may be appropriate. For more information on bank stabilization methods, see Guide 07,

Restoring Stream Banks With Vegetation, Guide 08, Trees for Ditches, Guide 11, Tree Kickers, Guide 12, Evergreen Revetments, Guide 13, Forested Buffer Strips, Guide 14, Live Fascines, Guide 15, Gabion Revetments, Guide 16, Rip Rap Revetments, and Guide 17, Live Cribwalls.

The following equipment is typically used for logjam removal projects: hand tools to facilitate removal of small debris; articulated log skidders with cable winches to remove larger logs; a chain saw or reciprocating saw to cut large logs and trees to manageable size; an adequate length of cable, chain, or rope to attach to the logs to facilitate their removal; a tractor, truck, or team of draft horses on the top of the stream bank to pull the logs out of the stream; and a wagon or truck on which to load the debris for subsequent removal from the floodplain.

Large logjams that are already well established need to be left for properly trained and equipped crews to remove. Specialized power equipment and explosives should never be used by anyone other than highly trained experts. The use of expensive and elaborate equipment is often not necessary when landowners take the time to perform routine maintenance and upkeep on their properties.

## WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD BE TAKEN BEFORE AND DURING AN OBSTRUCTION REMOVAL PROJECT?

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources recommends a consultation with the county engineer and local floodplain coordinator prior to initiation of an obstruction removal project. All tractors and other wheeled or tracked vehicles need to be kept out of the stream channel and well away from the top of the bank. Logjam removal activities should never be attempted alone, and a crew leader should be appointed to keep visual contact with everyone on the crew. The utmost caution should be taken to protect the personal safety of all workers. To avoid unnecessary damage to the streambank or riparian corridor, a single route to and from the project site should be utilized.

## REFERENCES

Mecklenburg, Dan, Rainwater and Land Development—Ohio's Standards for Stormwater Management, Land Development, and Urban Stream Protection, 2nd edition, 1996, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources in cooperation with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency.



This Guide is one of a series of Ohio Stream Management Guides covering a variety of watershed and stream management issues and methods of addressing stream related problems. All Guides, including an Index of Titles, are available from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. To obtain copies contact the ODNR Division of Soil and Water Resources at 2045 Morse Road, Building B-2, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693 or 614/265-6740 or mailto: water@dnr.state.oh.us.

For more information about the project call ODNR, Division of Soil and Water Resources at 614/265-6740. Each Guide is designed to be easily and clearly reproduced and can be bound in a notebook. Single copies are available free of charge. When distributing guides at meetings or in mailings, please use printed editions as a master for reproducing the number of copies you need, or you may print high quality originals from PDF files available on-line at: <http://www.ohiodnr.gov/soilandwater/>

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