

TREE JAMS ON THE BRANCH

During the winter of 1979, flood waters swept down The Branch in Elizabethtown causing five deaths in the wash-out of a state highway, destruction of several small dams, and the flooding of downtown businesses. With three more flood events in the late 1990's, riparian trees along The Branch upstream of the footbridge were uprooted and swept into huge debris jams. Unprotected soils were washed away leaving gravel and cobble bars that changed the former single channel into a braided river with multiple channels.

During the summer of 2000, BRASS surveyed The Branch to determine the number of channels and cut-off channels, bankfull and flood prone levels, the expanse of cobble bars and debris jams. The flood prone area with cobble bars and tree jams was at times more than 400 feet in width along a 1150-foot stream length. Because this section is but a half mile from a major bridge near the flood-prone business district, BRASS thought it important to remove the tree jams prior to the next high water event. Removal will also give the braided areas a chance to re-form into a single channel and possibly restore true streambanks capable of supporting vegetation once again.

Armed with a small grant from the State Soil & Water Conservation Committee, chain saws, a hand-powered cable hoist, and strong backs, the BRASS director and employees of the Elizabethtown Highway Department and Americorps Volunteers cut free the trees tangled up in the jams. As many logs as possible were carried or winched up a log ramp to get them off the floodplain. Huge root wads and other logs were stacked on two cobble bars so they can be burned as soon as weather conditions permit.

Americorps Volunteers were coordinated by Shawn Coleman, who grew up in New Russia and attended school in Elizabethtown. His parents still reside in New Russia and graciously allowed the volunteers to camp on their property. Thanks to Shawn, the Colemans, all the volunteers, and to the Elizabethtown Highway Department! There were some very, very hot days requiring very, very hard work. Feet and legs were but slightly cooled in water warm enough to bring out leeches. Now we only wait for enough rain to lift the fire ban.