

Portland Press Herald: Editorial & Reader Comments

River restoration bill would entail many costs

Fish-friendly dams are a laudable goal, but LD 1528 pushes too hard.

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May 21, 2007

— There was a time when diadromous fish -- those with life cycles in both salt and fresh water, including alewives, shad and Atlantic salmon -- abounded in Maine.

Those fish were important parts of our early economy -- until dams posed even greater economic promise. Paper mills and hydroelectric power companies capitalized on the tremendous energy of water flowing through turbines rather than freely through its natural channel.

Unfortunately, turbines, dams and fish did not mix, and many species were decimated as spawning runs became impassable.

A bill before the Legislature, LD 1528, would aim to restore Maine's diadromous fish populations by requiring that owners of dams in fresh and estuarine (salt-and-fresh) provide "safe and effective upstream and downstream passage" of diadromous fish. The bill also allows hefty fines and the ability of citizens to sue by alleging noncompliance.

A restoration of fish populations would be a benefit to Maine, but LD 1528 is too sweeping an approach. The cost to hydroelectric companies and paper companies such as Sappi Fine Paper in Westbrook is not known, but must be weighed. According to Sappi officials, fish passages can cost in the millions of dollars. Even if that's a high estimate, a mandate of widespread dam retrofitting could threaten jobs.

In the meantime, progress on river restoration is being made. A recent federal mandate calls for fish passages to be added to five Sappi-owned hydropower dams on the Presumpscot River. Another proposal is looking at a passage on the Cumberland Mills Dam in Westbrook, another Sappi property.

River restoration is a worthy endeavor with many long-term benefits, but we just can't afford to shackle other interests right now.

Reader comments

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rivergram of Windham, ME

May 25, 2007 12:46 PM

Once again we are being presented with false choices--jobs or the environment, hydropower or fish. In this day and age, we all have to be conscious of the need to become less dependent on fossil fuels and the need for good jobs, but sacrificing our rivers and the creatures that depend on them is not the answer. The rivers of America have been giving their share for economic prosperity in a myriad of ways for the last 250 years. It's time we gave back.

People are struggling to keep Atlantic salmon alive, to bring back the harvest of alewife and shad and keep the American eel from becoming another lost creature. No environmental group that I know of is getting rich and is prospering from citizen suits or any other tools that can be used to protect these species. On the contrary, many are hanging in there at great personal costs to do what they see as the right thing for the natural world.

While we may not agree on the methods or what should be done, let's not attribute sinister motives to people doing this work and we will do the same for you.

The PPH is looking in the wrong place when they say environmentalists go too far and the costs are too great for industry. The costs are too great for rivers and always have been. Take a hard look at corporate America's priorities and our government's energy policies and see if there isn't a better way than taking another 50 years to change policy and fix the damage we have done to our river systems. If not now, WHEN?

Peter Thompson of Syracuse, NY

May 23, 2007 2:53 PM

I landed my first Atlantic salmon at the Gravel Pool on the Veazie side of the Penobscot River many years ago now. I had always heard that salmon fishing was a "rich man's" sport, but I still can't say that I ever ran into many financially "rich" anglers on that river (myself included). In fact it was mainly the "blue collar" folks who lived and worked in Bangor and Waterville that fished the river every day of the season who took the vast majority of Atlantic salmon.

I work with a group of inner city kids here in Syracuse NY now, showing them the waters in and around town. Because they get their information almost exclusively from electronic sources these kids think that all water in Syracuse is dirty (in spite of the fact that the whole system is full of fish, many of which are naturally spawned trout) AND they also believe that there could very well be very hungry anacondas lurking anywhere there's water and trees. They have no idea how much of the vast natural bounty our ancestors found on this grand continent we have sacrificed to the greedy god of human "needs."

So, let's keep driving our SUVs and building our over-lit McMansions till the cows come home to find no pastures left in which they might graze and no honey bees to pollinate the

vegetable crops we all need to survive. It's ALL CONNECTED and we've already broken too many of those natural links. The future of our species is dependent on our coming to a sustainable compromise with the planet.

We're willing spend billions on our own weapons of mass destruction, so why do we so begrudge the \$s we might have to spend to allow a run of shad or alewife passage to their pre-historic spawning grounds?

Will Plumley of Windham, ME

May 22, 2007 8:32 AM

I was shocked to see this editorial in a newspaper that has advocated for a balanced approach for years. This editorial is locked into questionable economic assertions and ignores the other two values of sustainability - Environment and Community. I look forward to seeing a return to a more balanced approach to the common good.

kerry hardy of Rockland, ME

May 21, 2007 9:25 PM

This editorial blithely buys into the same false arguments that business interests and their elected friends have used for centuries: that dams somehow create more jobs than would exist in the ecosystems they disrupt; that dams and fish are an "either-or" proposition; and that fishways are impossibly costly. None of these are true, but by repeating them often enough they become a public mantra; like those "weapons of mass destruction" we've spent \$400 billion looking for so far.

In fact, dam owners have used every trick in the book since day one to stall, avoid, repeal, and outright defy the common-sense laws that have been passed in defense of our rivers. They're still doing it, with the necessary wink and a nod from our governor and his commissioners, and apparently this paper as well.

Notice the editor's subtle use of inflammatory words: lowly citizen lawsuits would merely "allege" non-compliance; yet SAPPI officials' cost estimate of "millions of dollars" is treated as solid fact. He tells us that widespread dam retrofitting could "threaten" jobs, without acknowledging that restored fisheries could create new ones-- perhaps more than we have at present!

Just as citizen referendums are a necessary check on our legislative branch, so too are citizen lawsuits a necessary balance to a dysfunctional executive branch. When our state agencies won't enforce existing environmental laws against pulp/paper or hydroelectric companies, how else can we insist on the law being upheld? DEP's last commissioner had to step down a year ago because of thinly-veiled collusion with dam owners on the Androscoggin River to avoid environmental compliance; it should be quite clear to all by now that the fix is in between big paper, big hydro and the Blaine House.

LD 1528 is exactly the dose of iodine needed to start cleaning up the wounds to Maine's fisheries; we shouldn't miss this chance just because of dam owners whining about how it's going to sting.

spome of Harpswell, ME

May 21, 2007 9:28 AM

"the ability of citizens to sue by alleging noncompliance" You don't suppose there are environmental groups and lawyers salivating over that prospect?

Frank Heller of Brunswick, ME

May 21, 2007 9:17 AM

We may have reaching the tipping point where a sustainable supply of energy from native renewable resources like hydro is more important than those elusive and very expensive wild atlantic salmon or shad.

There are ways to generate electricity without dams; so we can have the electricity and migratory species for wealthy sports to 'catch & release'.

Perhaps it's time to start building energy weirs so we can re-install hydro power generators?

Doug Watts of Augusta, ME

May 21, 2007 9:14 AM

"The cost to hydroelectric companies and paper companies such as Sappi Fine Paper in Westbrook is not known, but must be weighed."

How exactly do you you weigh something that is not known ?

Doug Watts of Augusta, ME

May 21, 2007 8:54 AM

The editorial fails to note the fact that fish passage at dams in Maine is already a mandatory requirement of the federal Clean Water Act and Maine's water quality statutes, as affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2006 and the Maine Supreme Court in 2005 and reported by the PPH itself. The problem is that Maine's DEP refuses to enforce Maine law already on the books in this respect -- which is why LD 1528 is required.

Apparently the PPH is unable or unwilling to read their own past stories on this topic.

It would be refreshing for once if the PPH editorial writers could do a tiny bit of factual background research on a topic before opining on it. That is called professional journalism -- a commodity about as common in Maine these days as wild Atlantic salmon.

Did it occur to the PPH editorial staff that this editorial completely contradicts every single other PPH editorial on this topic in the last 5 years regarding fish passage on the Presumpscot, Kennebec, Sebasticook and Penobscot Rivers ?

Do you folks even read your own newspaper ?