

Fish battle may soon be over

ENVIRONMENT: Lobby group, environmentalists await Governor of Maine's reaction to EPA ruling on alewife blockade

Vern Faulkner

A Maine-based environmental group has scored a significant victory in a long-running international battle that affects the St. Croix River waterway.

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, a Maine-based environmental group, has long battled a State of Maine decree banning access for alewives – a species of herring – from historic spawning ground up the river.

Maine created the law in 1995, in response to appeals from outfitters who claimed the fish were affecting the stocks of smallmouth bass – an invasive species introduced in the last century.

However, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency this week has informed the State of Maine that blocking the fish from upriver access violates the U.S. Clean Water Act. This move came after the FOMB issued a letter of intent to sue to the EPA for not enforcing its regulations.

The EPA response, which comes on the heels of several Maine First Nations chiefs making a similar appeal to restore alewife access in June, puts pressure on the State of Maine to respond.

"We'd have a bit more of a confluence, with the tribes united on opening up the river. Obviously, environmentalists want to open up the river, and now the EPA wants to open up the river," reflected Ed Friedman, chair of FOMB.

Governor Paul LePage is expected to respond to the EPA demands Monday.

"It's hard to say what he'll do," said



Photo courtesy of pointofviewhelicopters.com

This is the Grand Falls fishway, as seen from the air. For the last 17 years, alewives - also known as river herring - have been barred from swimming beyond this point to their natural spawning grounds. As a result, numbers of the fish have plummeted from 2.3 million to just a few thousand.

Friedman.

LePage, a Republican, does not have much of a pro-environmental track record. However, Friedman said the FOMB – now supported by the Conservation Law Foundation, EPA and Passamaquoddy peoples – is "perfectly willing to go back into court, if need be."

Friedman acknowledged the alewife blockade has essentially created a battle between a natural species and the invasive bass.

"This has always been an issue, for us, the introduced ... species has certainly been getting preference over the native, migratory species, which makes no sense at all."

Those who have protested the blockade have also questioned the lack of scientific data supporting claims the alewives harm bass.

Looking ahead, Friedman is optimistic that the alewife run of 2013 will be unimpeded.

"I think the chances are very good. Even if the state says no, that (the EPA statement) will have very good traction if we return to court."

Fundy Baykeeper Matt Abbott, one of the Canadian-based groups supporting efforts to re-open the river to alewives, heralded the EPA move.

"I think this is a significant turning point. This follows on the heels of the joint statement by the Passamaquoddy chiefs and very powerful statements by other native leaders," he said.

The points of opposition raised by the state have "been disappearing."

But the battle isn't over yet, Abbott noted.

"Like everyone else, I am being cautious. We have to see what the Governor says, on Monday."

This year, Abbott helped organize a protest and awareness event, tracing what the journey of the barricaded fish – which are vital to the Bay of Fundy ecosystem – might be.

"My hope is that next spring I am celebrating and not protesting when the fish run past Grand Falls."

Abbott questioned the lack of obvious political activity from the federal government over what is a shared waterway.

"We've certainly called for greater actions over the years. It's primarily federal jurisdiction," said Abbott.

He did, however, credit Department of Fisheries workers for, in the past, cap-

"I think this is a significant turning point."

Matt Abbott, Fundy Baykeeper

turing the fish in the lower reaches of the river and transporting them upriver of the blockaded fishways.

That, said Abbott, "seems to be what saved the run so we have something to save now."

However, he said there had been little action on both the federal and provincial levels, politically speaking.

"At the provincial level ... there's lots of pressures the province could have applied," but did not, said Abbott.

Such pressures include revising a current ban on removing bass from shared waters such as Spednic Lake, which effectively preserves the invasive species.

Friedman, too, said that apart from DFO workers on the ground, Canada had been "silent," politically, on this issue.

"I don't know if our governments are trading alewives for help in Afghanistan – who knows how convoluted these things get."

But that may not matter now, he said, because the battle to restore the little fish to its natural habitat may soon be over.

"This is a great win for alewives, and for the people in America and Canada," he said.

MP John Williamson could not be reached for comment.

editor@stcroixcourier.ca

Grace Helen Mowat's art work on display

Barb Rayner

SAINT ANDREWS

Art work by Cottage Craft founder Grace Helen Mowat will be featured in a developing exhibit at the newly opened Hooked Rug Museum of North America in Queensland, N.S.

The New Brunswick activist and folk artist was renowned for her tweed designs and a number of her early original designs for hand hooked rugs have been found and been replicated for an exhibit by rug hookers in the region.

After teaching art in New England and Nova Scotia, Mowat returned home to the family farm, Beech Hill in Saint Andrews, where, as a single woman in her early 30s, with very little capital, she launched her cottage industry in 1913.

Using wool from Charlotte County farms coloured using vegetable dyes and spun into yarn at a local mill, she began supplying weavers and embroiderers throughout the county with material that was ultimately used to create blankets, bedspreads, bags, woven yarn goods, hooked and woven rugs.

For patterns and motifs,

Mowat instructed them to weave, hook or embroider the colours, scenes and activities around them. Her objective was to tell the story of her place and her people; to reproduce in handmade woolen goods, the colours, the contours and the life of Charlotte County.

As well as making a living for herself, she wanted to improve life for farm families in the county. She said handcrafts were a cash crop as important as oats and barley that drew on the skills accumulated by generations of farm women.

She also led negotiations at the national level to develop and expand flax growing, which was traditionally used for linen and homespun weaving, to supply the industry she had developed with 50 or more skilled weavers.

In 1945 Mowat entrusted the business to Kent and Bill Ross who were succeeded, in turn by Kent's sons – first Jim and then Evan, the current proprietor and manager of the business located at 209 Water Street. Mowat died in 1964.

Museum researchers, working with New Brunswick rug hooker Erin McKenna and Evan and Michelle Ross, have recently recovered a number of authenticated

pieces of early Mowat art work from an old suitcase and salvaged a number of designs once used by her for rug hooking patterns, and as images on various craft products. A delicate bird scene has also been replicated from one of the salvaged original sketches.

A former Saint Andrews' resident, McKenna who now lives in the Sussex region, is a director at large of the Hooked Rug Museum and an active rug hooker herself.

Her initiative in this research with Michelle Ross has resulted in her being appointed as the voluntary honorary curator of the Mowat replication program which will be displayed at the developing museum on an interim basis this summer and a feature of the New Brunswick exhibits for the forthcoming 2013 opening events.

Besides curating the program, she has also hooked a replica of the Blockhouse which was created from an original Mowat drawing and in 2013 will be included in a War of 1812-14 commemorative exhibit at the museum, marking 200 years of peace between Canada and the U.S.

Despite a search, museum researchers have been unable to discover even one of the original vintage hooked rugs bearing a



Some of Mowat's creations.

Mowat design and anyone having one to sell or donate to the permanent museum collections has been asked to contact researcher W. H. Conrod at 902-275-5222.

Rug hooking heritage, which is

considered to be North America's oldest and most endangered pioneer art form, has been a neglected cultural area throughout the continent for several centuries.

The newly replicated Mowat collection, complete with interpretive panels will later be available to rug hooking groups for winter touring in New Brunswick.

This successful replication of lost rug art heritage is a significant component of a continent-wide effort by the rug hooking community to salvage its history.

Each of the images has been replicated with the permission of the current Cottage Craft owners for the permanent collection of the new international museum – the first of its kind in the world.

While the Hooked Rug Museum's formal opening ceremonies will not take place until 2013, a number of the exhibits of heritage and contemporary hooked rug craft and art will be on display this summer including 14 hand-hooked replicas from the long forgotten art work.

(with information from "Grace Helen Mowat and the making of Cottage Craft" by Diana Rees with Ronald Rees.

barb@stcroixcourier.ca