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Coalition cleans up

SIX PRIORITIES

- Improve water quality standards for the Androscoggin and St. Croix rivers (LR 775)
- Issue bonds to fund Land for Maine's Future Program (LR 1269)
- More sales of cleaner cars in Maine (will be a legislative resolution)
- Help towns fight sprawl (LR 1912)
- Prevent lead poisoning of Maine's children (LR 2022)
- Sufficiently fund state agencies (Department of Environmental Protection, Maine Forest Service) to protect the environment

The Androscoggin River is among the priorities outlined by environmental groups.

BY BONNIE WASHUK
Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — The cleanup of the Androscoggin River is one of six environmental efforts the governor and lawmakers must approve this session.

That was the message from a coalition of 25 environmental

groups, representing 100,000 members, who on Thursday outlined their legislative agenda to protect Maine's children, wildlife, water and air.

Besides restoring water quality in the Androscoggin and St. Croix rivers, the objectives are: reducing children's exposure to lead, ensuring Maine's natural resource agencies have enough money to do their jobs, issuing bonds for \$75 million to preserve public land, reducing air pollution through cleaner cars, and curbing sprawl.

"From the sky to the sea, from our forests to our rivers, Maine's children, water, wild-

life and land face daunting environmental threats," said Eliza Townsend of Maine League of Conservation Voters, one of the groups in the coalition of 25.

Leeds resident Neil Ward spoke for the Androscoggin, urging lawmakers to reverse a law passed last year that allowed lower water quality standards for the Androscoggin and St. Croix.

Ward said he and his wife, Ann, remember as youngsters how the Androscoggin — with its fumes and dead fish — was something to stay away from. The river is better now, Ward said, but still not clean enough

for their 3-year-old son, Ambrose, to fish and swim in. That was a promise made "when native son Edmund Muskie championed passage of the Clean Water Act," he said.

Ward said he and others aren't asking the paper mills on the river to do anything unusual or meet tougher standards. "We're asking them to meet the same standards as those who use other Maine rivers, and those are the lowest Class C standards of the Clean Water Act, which the Androscoggin River has not met in 30 years."

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Cleanup

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Other individuals representing the coalition also stood and spoke to each of the six priorities.

Dick Walthers of Otisfield asked that state agencies charged with protecting Maine's waters, wildlife and outdoors have enough money to do the job.

To fight threats of illegal introduction of wildlife or invasive plant life, such as the milfoil that chokes lakes, "we need the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and Department of Conservation to be adequately funded," Walthers said. Money that those departments receive "is minuscule."

Jayne Lello of Sebec spoke for a \$75 million bond for the Land for Maine's Future Program. She told of coastal farms turned into house lots and sold for more than \$1 million each. The north woods "are being bought and sold in 1,000-acre tracts," she said. "What used to be a dependable, harvestable forest is now owned by Canada, Delaware, California, Alabama," she said.

Public lands need to be preserved, Lello said, so Mainers "can always swim at the beach, walk in the forest and fish in the streams."

Jan Wilk of Sebago asked for a regulation that would mandate that by 2009, 10 percent of all new cars sold must be low-emission polluters. She has a son with asthma, and said that when summer air becomes too polluted he must stay indoors. Much of Maine's pollution comes from out-of-state plants, she said, but Mainers also gen-

erate a lot from cars and trucks they drive.

One way to curb that is for more people to drive more fuel-efficient vehicles, like the Toyota hybrids her family owns. They get 50 miles per gallon, drive well "and handle well in the snow."

Sandra Cort of South Windham spoke for a bill to prevent lead poisoning. The best way to do that, she said, is make sure children live in lead-free homes. But Maine "has a lot of work to do." Only 1 percent of Maine homes estimated to contain lead-based paint have been made safe, Cort said. Lead poisoning is a root cause of learning disabilities, brain damage and behavioral disabilities.

And Virginia Goodlett of Augusta said municipalities need help to fight sprawl. In Augusta there are proposals for "big box" stores that would turn fields and houses into "seas of asphalt." That sprawl contributes to more pollution, more development in rural areas and higher rural property taxes, while leaving downtowns barren, she said.

While it is not unusual for various environmental groups to form alliances, the coalition

WHO ARE THEY?

The groups in an informal coalition that are calling on Gov. John Baldacci and the Legislature to adopt six bills they say are necessary to protect Maine's environment. Collectively the groups have 100,000 members.

Appalachian Mountain Club

Atlantic Salmon Federation

Bicycle Coalition of Maine

Conservation Law Foundation

Environmental Health Strategy Center

Environment Maine

Friends of Casco Bay

Friends of the Presumpscot River

GrowSmart Maine

Maine Audubon

Maine Coast Heritage Trust

Maine Congress of Lake Associations

Maine Council of Churches

Maine Lakes Conservancy Institute

Maine League of Conservation Voters

Maine Rivers

Natural Resources Council of Maine

The Nature Conservancy

Northern Forest Alliance

The Ocean Conservancy

RESTORE: The North Woods

Sierra Club

Toxics Action Center

Trust for Public Land

The Wilderness Society

behind the six initiatives is one of the largest ever, according to Townsend. The groups came together in the "unprecedented"

way because all six goals must be addressed by lawmakers this session, she said.

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