

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

# Fish fight

## Salmon spawns species debate

BY SCOTT THISTLE AND  
TERRY KARKOS  
*Sun Journal Staff*

LEWISTON — There's a simple reason the stream near the Lewiston-Lisbon town line is named Salmon Brook.

"They were here," John Ponte said. "They didn't name these places without reason."

Ponte, an Auburn native and longtime member of Trout Unlimited, was among the fish and river experts in Maine trying to digest the latest proposal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

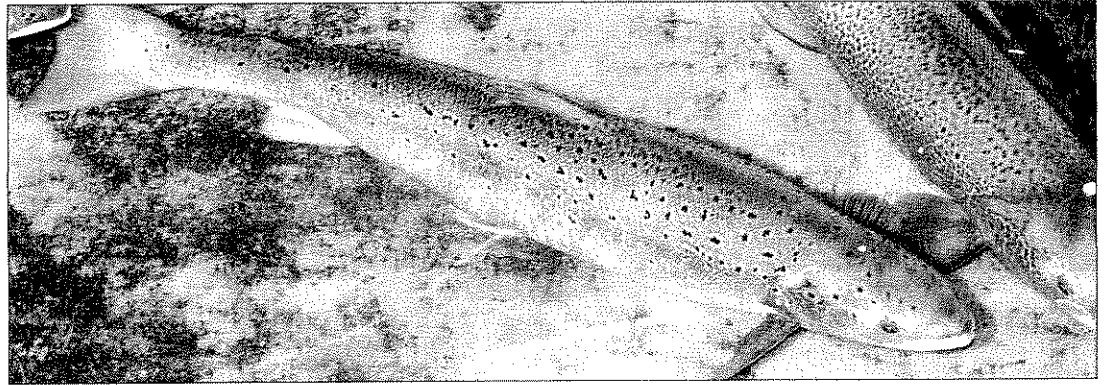
On Tuesday, the service announced it wants to expand its endangered species listing for Atlantic salmon to include the entire Kennebec, Penobscot and Androscoggin rivers and their tributaries.

The move was applauded by environmentalists and slammed by outdoorsmen. Paper mill officials said it was too early for them to take a position.

The 40-page proposal will take some time to analyze before it's taken up by the Maine Department of Marine Resources' Atlantic Salmon Commission at its Sept. 18 meeting.

Nick Bennett, staff scientist with the Natural Resources Council of Maine, said he had not yet reviewed the proposal, but his take on it was that salmon are in trouble and need help. It makes sense, Bennett said, to focus on the Androscoggin, Kennebec and Penobscot rivers because they have historically had the greatest salmon production.

SEE FISH FIGHT PAGE A4



Wild atlantic salmon

ASSOCIATE PRESS FILE PHOTO

## Fish fight

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

Historically, salmon were found as far north as the Rumford Falls. If salmon could be restored, "That would be a good thing," Bennett said. "The question is how to do it."

Focusing attention on the three big rivers is logical, Bennett said, "because it doesn't make sense to try to restore it only in these smaller rivers when these three big rivers have been the most important rivers for salmon."

Recent studies on other Maine rivers have suggested attention should be focused on the Androscoggin, Kennebec and Penobscot, Bennett said. "That there should be some reaction to that by the federal government is not surprising."

### SAM: Salmon proposal disastrous

The head of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine had a different perspective on the proposal, calling it disastrous.

"If you remember when the feds moved in this direction — Down East — Gov. (Angus) King sued them," George Smith said. "SAM was a party to that, but we lost and it's had significantly negative impacts to fishing opportunities Down East."

The designation could prohibit the stocking of other types of fish that may compete with the salmon for food.

"We have some spectacular rainbow, brook and brown trout fishing in several places from the upper Androscoggin to Shawmut Dam on the Kennebec," Smith said. "All those are going to be challenged, because, as we've seen Down East, everything focuses on salmon."

Smith said his group is hoping for a "vigorous challenge to the listing" from Gov. John Baldacci's office. "That's what we'll be encouraging," he said.

Baldacci and others "need to react strongly" against the salmon proposal, Smith said.

David Farmer, a spokesman for Baldacci, said Friday that the administration didn't believe an endangered species listing was the best way to restore Atlantic salmon in Maine. Farmer also said Baldacci wanted to work cooperatively with the federal government toward the best interests of the salmon and Maine people.

"We don't want to get into a war with the federal government over the Endangered Species Act," Farmer said. "That fight the last time didn't help anybody and certainly didn't help the fish."

The federal government listed Atlantic salmon as endangered on eight Down East rivers in November 2000, saying the species was in danger of extinction.

Maine fought the decision, contending the salmon on those rivers were not genetically distinct from other salmon, including salmon in eastern Canada. The state eventually dropped its lawsuit and agreed to work with the federal agencies.

The eight affected rivers were the Dennys, East Machias, Machias, Narraguagus, Pleasant, Ducktrap and Sheepscot, plus Cove Brook, a tributary of the Penobscot River.

Unlike the 2000 designation, the proposed expansion would apply to large rivers that are home to industry and hydroelectric dams.

### Paper mills: Wait and see

Androscoggin paper mill spokesmen said they were eyeing the proposal with trepidation.

"This is a very complicated issue and we are going to step back and understand the fed's position versus the state of Maine's position, then figure out what it really means to us," Verso Paper spokesman Bill Cohen said. Verso Paper has a mill on the Androscoggin in Jay.

Tony Lyons, spokesman for the New-Page mill on the Androscoggin in Rumford, agreed, saying it was difficult to

have a sense of the impact. His mill would likely take a wait-and-see attitude, he said.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection already manages the rivers, he said. The immediate impacts would likely be on the dams, since none has a fishway, Lyons said.

Hydroelectric plants, dam owners and municipal treatment plants could also be affected, he said. "Everyone on the river will watch this closely."

Neil Ward, program director for the Androscoggin River Alliance, was heartened by the news that the Androscoggin would be included because it would increase the focus on the waterway, which is often overlooked or dismissed by politicians in Maine, he said.

Expanding the habitat would be a good thing for the river's health, he said.

The alliance works with 14 area schools on Atlantic salmon projects. Students raise salmon fry from eggs and release them in the river. Last year, school children released 2,200 fry into the river.

So far this year, about 2,000 salmon from the proposed expanded endangered population have returned to spawn. Though it's a small increase, it's just 10 percent of the number required before spawning stocks are thought to be in good condition.

"It's just one more step in the right direction," Ward said. "It's one of the things that are going to change the dynamic on the river."

Expanding salmon habitat to include the Androscoggin adds weight to river advocates who want to see more done for salmon to return, including improving fishways or fish lifts at key dams, or the removal of dams where appropriate.

"We will never get them back if we don't protect their habitat," Ward said.

Staff writers Eileen Adams in Rumford and Donna Perry in Jay and The Associated Press contributed to this report.