

Our view:

Now, the river has a mouth

An unclear meeting notice from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection sounds trivial. Most of the rules and regulations which govern modern environmental laws are near-incomprehensible, anyway.

The DEP, in a lapse, failed to mention the Androscoggin River in a public notice of rivers and streams now being considered for re-classification under the Clean Water Act. The agency reviews this information every few years.

But in a meeting last month in Lewiston, the DEP talked about the Androscoggin, despite its exclusion from the official list. The Androscoggin River Alliance, an advocacy group, called the agency out.

In response, a sheepish DEP spokesman blamed the notice, calling it "not the clearest" ever produced.

We'll cut the DEP some slack. Clean Water Act re-classifications are complicated; overlooking the Androscoggin was likely simple bureaucratic oversight.

An intentional omission might have been preferable, though. The Androscoggin has been disregarded for years; this exclusion by the DEP is symptomatic of a greater problem with the river — a lack of stature.

The river has always had a reputation, but rarely a voice. While other Maine rivers have enjoyed renaissances, the Androscoggin has lagged behind. Concern about its health has often seemed ... almost an afterthought.

It's not the river's fault, either. The kinds of coalitions changing the fortunes of the Kennebec and Penobscot rivers hadn't coalesced for the Androscoggin. Plus, environmental progress has been tempered by the industrial demands for the river by the mills in Jay and Rumford.

Now, though, the river is generating attention. The Androscoggin River Alliance is emerging as a potent advocate, as evidenced by its successful demand of DEP to hold another, proper hearing.

Others, too, such as the Androscoggin Land Trust, are exerting influence. While river stakeholders may have disparate agendas, their primary goal is the same: turn the Androscoggin from an afterthought into a priority.

The river finally has a mouth.

This will not happen in a day, week, or even a year. And this will not happen through big splashes alone, like forcing power companies to fund riverside recreational opportunities, or bending environmental regulators to impose stringent standards on the mills.

It will happen slowly, opportunity by opportunity. An oversight in a routine DEP public notice? Not really a big deal — the agency publishes hundreds of notices each year. Typos will happen.

For a river accustomed to being left out, however, the omission was no minor matter.

The ARA deserves credit for holding the DEP accountable.

It was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.