

Meeting angers river group

BY LINDSAY TICE
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When the Maine Department of Environmental Protection held a public meeting June 18 to get comment on reclassifying some rivers, brooks and streams, the Androscoggin River Alliance didn't go. The Androscoggin River wasn't up for reclassification or discussion, according to the public notice.

And while alliance members say they care about the state of the Kennebec and Aroostook rivers, they didn't have time to attend a meeting in which their issues wouldn't be discussed.

Except Androscoggin was up for discussion.

The public just didn't know about it.

"We were pretty upset," said alliance director Neil Ward.

The DEP has now agreed to hold another public meeting to allow comment from people interested in water quality and the Androscoggin River. The DEP concedes the public notice could have been more informative.

"This isn't the clearest product from my office, I must admit," spokesman Scott Cowger said.

Held at Lewiston City Hall,

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Lewiston, Maine, Wednesday, July 30, 2008

River

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the June 18 meeting was billed as a discussion about reclassifying more than two dozen rivers, streams and brooks based on their water quality. By state law, the DEP must look at reclassification every few years.

The Androscoggin River wasn't on the reclassification list and wasn't on the agenda specifically, but DEP officials did plan to talk about water quality standards and pollution in general — of definite interest to Androscoggin River enthusiasts, who have fought for decades to clean up the river. The public notice, however, didn't make clear such topics would be up for discussion.

Public comments help guide DEP decisions and recommendations to the Legislature.

The DEP estimates a handful of people showed up June 18. "Maybe a couple of handfuls," Cowger said.

During the meeting, a DEP official gave a PowerPoint presentation about water quality and showed a photo of the Verso Paper Mill in Jay to illustrate an example. Androscoggin River advocates have long been concerned about pollution from Verso.

Ward said he would have

On the Web

■ For more information on meeting dates or to comment on water quality issues outside of a public meeting, go to www.mainedep.com

been there if he had known the meeting was expected to cover such issues.

"All we want is our due process and the opportunity to stand up for the river," he said. "And it's also important for us that the general public understand that this is going to be a topic of discussion and they have the opportunity to stand up and speak their mind."

Alliance officials wrote the DEP and objected to the meeting. They requested another meeting to allow people to speak about the Androscoggin.

Cowger said the DEP never received the letter, which was dated July 16, but it did obtain a copy recently when a reporter inquired about the matter. He said the department didn't mean to mislead anyone about the meeting's agenda.

"We want that public input. We seek it," Cowger said.

The DEP has agreed to set up another meeting. It will likely be held the first or second week of August.