
Our view:

Giving a lift for the river's health

In mid-November, Florida Power & Light agreed to a 20-year plan to construct fish lifts and ladders along the Saco River. FPL operates nine hydropower dams along the 134-mile river; the total cost of this fish passage project is estimated at \$30 million.

Dams, although great producers of energy, are insurmountable for most fish species that travel into Maine's rivers.

Most noted among these are Atlantic salmon, whose stocks have only recently been restored enough to allow recreational fishing in the Penobscot River.

Many species are trucked from downriver sites for upriver releases, a time-consuming and costly enterprise that risks fish mortality. Removing or getting around dams is a safer, long-term solution for preserving and enhancing the ecosystems of Maine's rivers; in this, much progress is being made.

The Saco is but the latest example. The Kennebec, Penobscot and Presumpscot rivers too have all benefited from efforts to improve the travel of myriad fish species within their banks, which has brought vibrancy to their environments and grins to the faces of environmentalists statewide.

Notably absent, however, is the Androscoggin River. Maine's river of industry, again, is being overlooked in this latest bonanza of environmental investment. It's a head-shaking scenario.

And there are about a million reasons why.

River advocates point to Brunswick first. There, they say, the more than 20-year-old fish ladder — the Brunswick fishway — is inadequate for helping native species return into the Androscoggin, especially iconic species such as Atlantic salmon. Their numbers are minuscule; about a dozen annually recorded at the gate.

Neil Ward, of the Androscoggin River Alliance, has a picture of two Atlantic salmon snapped by state scientists at the fishway. He uses it as a reminder of how far the river has fallen, and the goal for its return — to see again wild salmon prevalent in the river.

It's a far-off dream, admittedly, as long as the Androscoggin lags behind other Maine rivers in capital investment — like modern fish passages — and restoration of public image. There's a sense, Ward says, that the Androscoggin is overlooked because it's regarded as only an "industrial river."

There are ways to change this. Public relations is always an option. But so is showing decided improvement in species restoration, and getting the Androscoggin mentioned alongside those other Maine rivers regarded as improving its environmental conditions.

If the Brunswick fishway is as miserable as river advocates say, it must be considered for replacement or improvement. Other rivers are reaping the rewards of improved travel for its native species, which is regarded as crucial for their futures.

This is doubly important for the Androscoggin.
