

St. Croix River Stand-Off - by John Burrows

The headwater lakes of the St. Croix River contain 40% of alewife spawning habitat in Maine, with the potential to produce a run of more than 25 million adults. The river has been off-limits to alewives since 1995, when fishways at the Woodland and Grand Falls Dams were ordered closed by the Maine Legislature out of misplaced concern that native alewives were detrimental to the non-native smallmouth bass in the St. Croix drainage. This was accomplished through fear mongering by a group of bass fishing guides and outfitters in Washington County.

This past year, Maine Rivers and its partners Atlantic Salmon Federation (ASF) and Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM) were the lead advocates for the re-opening of fishways on the St. Croix River. Since the closing of the fishways, returns of alewives to the St. Croix have fallen from a high of more than 2.5 million fish in 1987 to only 1,300 fish in 2007.

In 2007, Maine Rivers released an independent scientific report establishing that alewives are not detrimental to smallmouth bass. Armed with the new science, Maine Rivers, ASF and NRCM obtained the support of the 25 member Environmental Priorities Coalition to work to overturn the 1995 law. Our bill to re-open the fishways was heard before the Marine Resources Committee in early March. Supporters of restoring alewives outnumbered opponents by 2:1.

Unfortunately, despite clear scientific, historical, and archeological evidence of the presence of alewives throughout the system, and strong public support, we were ultimately unsuccessful in our effort to re-open access to the watershed above Grand Falls. Why did we fail? The answer is backroom politics. Through the hearing, we had the full support of the State of Maine to reopen fish passage at both dams. However, before the bill was to be worked by the Committee, Maine Governor Baldacci met at the State House with Governor Nicholas of the Indian Township Passamaquoddy Indian Tribe. This branch of the Passamaquoddy Tribe opposes alewife restoration.

After the meeting, state fisheries agencies were ordered to work with the tribe to come up with a mutually agreeable plan for alewife restoration before the species will be allowed above Grand Falls. A legislative compromise was reached which provides for passage for alewives at the Woodland Dam in 2008, and establishes an ambiguous process for the state agencies to work with the tribe on a river herring management plan for the St. Croix above Grand Falls, and to report back to the legislature in January 2009. Opening the fishway at the Woodland Dam for this year's spawning run is a small victory. The Woodland Flowage provides only about 1,200 surface acres of marginal spawning habitat. While it will probably allow the run to maintain itself and perhaps to grow, it is far from ideal.

In terms of where we go next, the path is unclear. Anadromous fish restoration is a top priority of Maine Rivers. Alewives are a native fish, and a fundamental part of the food chain for both inland waters and the marine environment. Maine Rivers will continue to work with its allies for restoration of alewives in the St. Croix River system.

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