

LSJ-PPH Andro Upgrade Vote 3-30-22

[Lawmakers back long-sought upgrade of Androscoggin River water quality](#)

Steve Collins

Without a single dissenting vote, both houses of the Legislature have endorsed [a bill that would upgrade the water quality standard](#) for a more than 14-mile stretch of the Androscoggin River from Lisbon Falls to the sea.

The proposal for a higher legal classification from the Worumbo Dam to Merrymeeting Bay, where six rivers converge, would force regulators to take steps to maintain water quality, a move that over time could have a potentially costly impact on mills, sewage treatment plants and dams.

Beth Ahearn, director of government affairs for Maine Conservation Voters, called the unanimous votes in the House and Senate “a fitting tribute” to the landmark federal Clean Water Act pushed through 50 years ago by U.S. Sen. Edmund Muskie, a Maine Democrat who grew up in Rumford.



The Androscoggin River flows past the historic Pejepscot Paper Co. mill in Topsham as seen from the Brunswick side of the river. *Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal*

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Ahearn said lawmakers' votes offered "resounding support for protecting Maine's waters."

The change in the river classification of the lower Androscoggin from C, the lowest grade, to B is just one of many revisions in the bill that provides more protection for about 800 miles of Maine waterways.

But the Androscoggin holds special significance as both a key river in the Pine Tree State and the one that Muskie knew most intimately as he pressed to reverse the water pollution that had turned the once-pristine waterway into a stinking, discolored and unsafe mess.

Given the support of the state Department of Environmental Protection for the bill, it is likely that Gov. Janet Mills will sign the measure into law. It is not expected to pose a financial burden for the state.

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The DEP's director of the Bureau of Water Quality, Brian Kavanah, told lawmakers the department had questions about an earlier effort to raise the classification level to B from Lewiston to the mouth of the river.

He said the shorter section eyed in the bill won't raise the same concerns.

The problem with starting the higher classification in Lewiston is that the Gulf Island Pond, where the dam is located above the fall, adds many complications to water level issues, especially in low-water conditions.

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The river's quality is worse from Rumford to the pond than it is downstream. But adding the 19 miles from the Gulf Island Dam to the Worumbo Dam needs more review, officials said, because it may impact the discharge license limits for the Lewiston-Auburn Water Pollution Control Authority and for three paper mills along the river.

Environmentalists are convinced they can make the case for upgrading the classification for the river from the Gulf Island Dam to Merrymeeting Bay, but that won't happen this year.



Susan Caldwell, left, and Dan Coker stop Wednesday on the Swinging Bridge in Brunswick to admire the beauty of the Androscoggin River. The two work in Fort Andross, background, and say they often take a walk around the River loop for a “walking meeting” instead of sitting in a conference room. *Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal*

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Rivers in Maine are regulated based on their classification, which, simplistically, is based on how polluted they are. Each waterway is rated as either an AA, A, B or C freshwater river, with AA the best and C the worst.

The state system says that an AA stream would have no waste discharge into its waters or any impoundment from a dam. An A classification would have a little more risk of degradation from “very restricted discharges.”

Rivers with a B rating have fewer restrictions on activities, “but still maintain high water quality criteria” that require stricter rules for discharges from treatment plants, factories or any other point where water is directed into the river.

A C-rated river, the state says, is “still good quality, but the margin of error before significant degradation might occur” is less, most likely in the case of a spill or a drought that makes dilution of discharges tougher.