

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay

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Press Release

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Conservation Groups Sue Federal Government to Protect Salmon in Maine; Agencies Stall on Endangered Listing

PORTLAND, *Maine* — Today Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, the Center for Biological Diversity and a Maine river activist filed suit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Division over the agencies' failure to take action on a petition to protect the dwindling Kennebec River population of Atlantic salmon under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"The Kennebec River salmon are on the verge of extinction, yet the agencies continue to stall," said Ed Friedman, chair of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay. "The salmon runs on the Kennebec were once the stuff of legend, but today only a few fish make it up the river. Will the government simply wait until even these survivors have disappeared?"

In 2000, responding to pressure from conservation groups, the federal government protected salmon runs on several small rivers in coastal Maine under the Endangered Species Act. However, the government refused protection for salmon inhabiting larger rivers in the more heavily developed regions of the central coast and western Maine.

In May 2005, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, Maine Toxics Action Coalition, and Douglas Watts submitted a petition to list the Kennebec River salmon population as endangered. Despite an agency finding in 2006 that the petition presents substantial scientific information indicating protection may be warranted, and a subsequent scientific report supporting the concerns of the petitioners, the agencies have failed to act.

"Atlantic salmon are as much a part of the natural and cultural heritage of New England as Pacific coast salmon have been a part of the history and character of the Northwest," declared Mollie Matteson of the Center for Biological Diversity. "If we lose an iconic species like the salmon, it will be a tragic blow to our unique identity as a people and as a region, not simply an ecological loss."

Since the eighteenth century, Atlantic salmon populations have declined precipitously throughout most of their range, both from severe water pollution and from dams blocking access to spawning grounds. Conservationists hope protecting the salmon under the Endangered Species Act will allow these and other threats to be addressed in time to save the salmon and other native migratory fish species from extinction.

Douglas Watts, author of the salmon petition, noted: "A decision on listing is nearly three years overdue. The Gulf of Maine fishery is in deep trouble; further delay on a listing decision is biologically and legally inexcusable."

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The Center for Biological Diversity is a national non-profit conservation organization that protects native species and their habitats through science, policy, and environmental law; the Northeast office of the Center is in Richmond, Vermont.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay is a non-profit organization, based in Richmond, Maine, dedicated to preserving the ecological, aesthetic, historical, recreational and commercial values of Merrymeeting Bay and its watershed.

Douglas Watts, of Augusta, Maine, has worked many years for indigenous fish restoration in Maine rivers.