

Maine open to ending fish dispute: official

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Maine may be willing to re-open more sections of the St. Croix River to gaspereau, according to the state's director of sea run fisheries. Maine blocked gaspereau from migrating up the St. Croix River in 1995 in an effort to protect the smallmouth bass, a fish that was introduced into the river system.

Environmentalists from both countries have appealed to the International Joint Commission, a group that mediates water disputes between the two countries, to help resolve the dispute. Maine's new Republican administration is casting blame for the fish dispute on the state legislature for a law aimed at "eradicating" the gaspereau from a river that is shared with New Brunswick.

"This thing is such a political football," said Patrick Keliher, Maine's director of sea run fisheries. Keliher is an appointee of the state's Republican Gov. Paul LePage, but has held the position in previous administrations. The state's House of Representatives and Senate are also controlled by the Republicans. Keliher said Maine's governor likes a plan being pushed by the International Joint Commission that is trying to mediate this border dispute between Canada and Maine.

The plan would see about 27 per cent of the St. Croix River re-opened to gaspereau. But, the state's legislature wants to keep the entire river blocked by fish ladders believing it is protecting the smallmouth bass that is favoured by anglers. Keliher said the state legislature has the final say on the river policy. "Frankly, we're not sure the legislature would be willing to overturn the existing law," Keliher said.

The issue may ultimately be decided by a U.S. federal court.

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, a state conservation group, has launched a lawsuit attempting to kill the Maine law. Ed Friedman, the group's chair, said if the suit is successful the entire river system would be re-opened. "We, as Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, are going to be doing a lot of people's dirty work by striking this law down," he said. However, the state is challenging the group's lawsuit. Last week, the state filed documents with the courts to dismiss the lawsuit, (while FOMB filed a Motion for Summary Judgment). [parenthesis added].