

Times Record Opinion: We can have electricity and eels

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By Ed Friedman

While the eel/dam editorial of May 22 starts off nicely, unfortunately it deteriorates into the realm of misinformation and the suggestion of what typically are useless stakeholder processes designed to dilute and delay.

The editors suggesting we take a go-slow approach with trialing upstream eel passage at small dams first did not look just upriver to refresh themselves on the fact that there are many low-tech upstream eel ramps 30 miles north of Brunswick on the Kennebec and Sebasticook rivers passing hundreds of thousands of juvenile eels at small and large dams. There are also turbines that have been screened successfully, stopping downstream eel and alewife kills for as little as \$2,500.

Some dams even minimize eel kills with night-time turbine shut-downs during the fall when eels out-migrate. To suggest engagement in the morass of stakeholder process may be well-intentioned but is pointless. In fact, for several years we have met with dam owners and agencies on multiple occasions with minimal or zero results. Acknowledging their dams do kill eels, FPLE, owners of Shawmut, Lockwood, and Weston projects on the Kennebec River, and Brunswick, Deer Rips, Gulf Island Pond and others on the Androscoggin River, still said to us in a meeting that they did not feel there was a problem and so they would continue with their eel studies before taking further action — literally studying them to death in our opinion.

In contrast to the Kennebec and many other rivers in the state, there is not a single upstream or downstream eel passage facility on the Androscoggin River system, with its 17 or so dams. How about the novel concept of having dam owners obey the law and Commissioner Dave Littell and Bureau of Land and Water Director Andy Fisk of Maine's Department of "Economic" Protection enforce it? Then and only then can we even consider dropping the citizen suit provision, something that does, by the way, exist in federal law.

One only has to read the Maine papers for about a week to see the DEP's repeatedly inadequate response to violations of our environmental laws.

State government insiders who have served under all three of the last administrations — Republican, Independent and now Democratic — note that the current Democratic one is easily the worst from the point of view of the environment. Others, working closely with the hydro industry affected by the proposed legislation say that the costs of fish passage are chump change to these companies. We do need clean power, there is no reason why it can't be truly green as well. All the dams on our rivers are old and long since paid for. At this point they are cash machines, generating profits from a public resource as long as water spins their turbines. Shouldn't we demand the highest environmental standard from those who make a private buck from a public resource? We have 2005 internal company documents from one dam owner [Ridgewood Hydro] showing record profits at nearly all of their facilities and specifically up 27 percent and 42 percent even at those dams that have installed upstream and downstream eel passage.

Aside from the fact that all of these dams actually only have between one and three employees associated with them, the "payroll vs. pickerel" argument raised is typically a false one designed to instill fear. The phrase

more accurately should be "pickerel for payroll," reflecting the greater economic gain associated with clean rivers. What we often say, particularly having seen corporate books showing record profits even at dams with installed passage is: "we can have eels and electricity."

The legislative sponsor of this bill, Sen. Dennis Damon, along with the cosponsors, including area Rep. Seth Berry and Thom Watson and a number of the Lewiston/Auburn delegation deserve kudos; they and other bill supporters have an opportunity to get it right here, with legislation of historic proportions.

The Gulf of Maine fishery is dying not only from over-fishing but because we are blocking major forage fish species from their native spawning and nursery habitat and often killing them in the process. With more than 60 percent of our species biodiversity found in riparian corridors, our arteries as it were, we must — if there is any chance of avoiding our continued slide towards environmental disaster — make these arteries and the blood (or fish) in them healthy once again.

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