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When the Maine Board of Environmental Protection rejected in February 2009 upgrading the water quality classification for the lower Androscoggin River from Class C to Class B, it gave this as its reason: "More data is needed to support a change in the classification."

Never mind that the section of the Androscoggin River from Worumbo Dam in Lisbon Falls to its mouth in Merrymeeting Bay by then had been actively monitored by well-trained volunteers of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay for 10 years. Or that the data they collected showed that for six years the lower Androscoggin had been meeting Class B dissolved oxygen standards and "nearly always" had met Class B bacteria level standards.

"More data is needed" — which is a polite bureaucratic way of saying "Come back later ... and maybe we'll consider it then."

The BEP's refusal begs the question: Who benefits from delaying upgrading the lower Androscoggin to the Class B standard that six years of data show is already being met more often than not?

It's not the people who swim, fish, canoe or kayak on that stretch of river. They would vigorously argue in favor of a higher standard because it means the river that inspired the 1972 federal Clean Water Act is that much closer to being healthy again. They place a high value on the return of bald eagles and osprey to that stretch of river; they welcome its resurgence of fish species that once roiled its waters by the hundreds of thousands.

Nor is it the municipalities along that stretch of river, who've spent millions upgrading their sewage treatment plants and sewer lines precisely because their citizens want to do what's right for the river. Auburn, Lewiston, Durham, Topsham, Brunswick, all wrote letters of support in for Friends of Merrymeeting Bay's 2009 petition to upgrade the lower Androscoggin to a Class B river.

They were joined by Androscoggin River Alliance, Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust, Merrymeeting Audubon Society, the Conservation Law Foundation, Natural Resources Council of Maine, Friends of Casco Bay, Maine Audubon, Maine Rivers, Atlantic Salmon Foundation and a number of private citizens — all writing letters of support.

So who benefits from the Androscoggin being kept a Class C river, instead of a Class B?

Anyone with even a casual understanding of Maine history — specifically, the power the paper and pulp industries have had over the decades in guiding our environmental policies — might identify paper companies with mills upriver in Jay and Rumford as prime suspects.

But if Class B standards are currently being met — as six years of data suggested — it would mean that existing industries along the river already are meeting clean water requirements. Presumably, then, they have nothing to fear and would not have to spend additional money to accomplish the upgrade.

No matter, the BEP made its ruling and called upon citizen groups such as Friends of Merrymeeting Bay and the Department of Environmental Protection "to work cooperatively to obtain the data necessary" to justify reclassification of the lower Androscoggin to Class B standards.

Well, that's exactly what took place last year, from April to mid-October. Friends of Merrymeeting Bay volunteers, working closely with the DEP, increased the frequency of sampling from monthly to every other week. They increased the sampling sites from three to 10.

The results verified the previous finding that the lower Androscoggin River consistently meets Class B standards for dissolved oxygen and E. coli bacteria.

What, then, are we waiting for? Isn't the point of federal and state clean water laws to improve water quality? Shouldn't the Department of Environmental Protection and its board be leading that charge?

Instead, they, along with the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee, seem content to regard the lower Androscoggin "the poor stepchild of Maine's rivers" — as Ed Friedman, chairman of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, so aptly expressed in his testimony seeking the upgrade in 2009.

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