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Maine Environmental Groups Sue Dam Owners over Salmon Protections

02/01/2011 Reported By: [Jay Field](#)

Two environmental groups say multiple dam owners and operators in Maine aren't doing enough to protect endangered wild Atlantic salmon. So they're suing the companies in U.S. District Court for violating the Endangered Species Act.

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Maine Environmental Groups Sue Dam Owners over Sal

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The suit focuses on eight dams on two rivers, the Androscoggin and the Kennebec. Doug Watts, with the group Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, has lived along the bank of the Kennebec, in Augusta, since 1991. He remembers how many salmon used to be in the river.

"Back in '91, you could actually fish for them," Watts says. "You had to release them. I used to fish for Atlantic salmon in downtown Augusta quite a bit. I had them swim through my legs."

Fast-forward twenty years. "I have not seen an Atlantic salmon in the Kennebec since 2005. That's the last time I saw one," Watts says.

In 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration put Atlantic salmon in the Kennebec, Androscoggin and Penobscot Rivers on the Endangered Species list. That prohibits the fish from being harassed or killed.

But that's exactly what NextEra Energy Resources, Brookfield Renewable Power, Merrill Limited Partnership, Miller Hydro Group and Topsham Hydro Partners are doing, according to the lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court. Friends of Merrymeeting Bay and another environmental group charge the dams' rotating turbines are killing fish. "I personally don't think this lawsuit is going to be helpful at all," says Patrick Keliher, who runs the Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission which oversees state efforts to restore the species.

Roughly 1,000 or more Atlantic salmon have returned to the Penobscot River in recent years. But on the Kennebec and Androscoggin, returns last year were in the single digits. It's the Salmon Commission's job to work with dam owners and operators to boost those numbers.

Keliher says Next Era Energy and the other companies are making a good faith effort to come up with habitat conservation plans that will bring the salmon back. "There is a feeling that there is not enough movement, fast enough, when, I can tell you, this frankly just takes a while to work out and folks need to be patient," he says.

Topsham Hydro Partners and Brookfield Renewable Power declined to comment, saying they hadn't had time to review the lawsuit. NextEra Energy Resources did not return a call for comment by airtime.

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