

# Legislators wade into alewife issue; Environment Chances 'very good' fishway will open, Maine environmentalists say

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ST. STEPHEN - Maine politicians will decide how far **alewives** go up the **St. Croix** River this year.

It depends on which bill the state legislature passes affecting dams and fishways, and whether it takes effect before the **alewives** return in May.

"I think the chances are very high that the fishway at Grand Falls will be opened this year in some way," Ed Friedman in Bowdoinham, Maine, chairman of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, said Friday.

Environmental groups object to state policy limiting the native anadromous fish, also called gaspereau and river herring, to about two per cent of their spawning areas.

Sport fishing interests believe **alewives** threaten exotic smallmouth bass - although many scientists say the two fish can get along fine.

If the legislature passes an emergency bill with two-thirds support, it would take effect immediately, Friedman explained.

A regular bill would wait 90 days after the legislative session ends in May or June, he said. The last **alewives** come up the river by early July.

Some people say this issue began in 1981 when the New Brunswick Power Corp. built a better fishway at the Milltown Dam. Others say it was 1877, when smallmouth bass were introduced to the **St. Croix**.

"I would say maybe it sort of started in the early 1800s when people started building dams," Landis Hudson, executive-director of Maine Rivers, said Friday.

**Alewives** at the Milltown counting fence increased from 169,620 in 1981 to 2,624,700 in 1987. Maine guides connected this to a drop in smallmouth bass. In 1995, Maine blocked passage at the Woodland Dam above Milltown but below Grand Falls.

The count at Milltown dropped to 900 in 2002. Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans began trucking **alewives** around Woodland. Maine reopened the Woodland fishway in 2008.

Last year, 36,216 **alewives** ascended the Milltown fishway, Abby Pond, executive-director of the **St. Croix** International Water Way Commission, said Friday.

In 2010, the International Joint Commission (IJC), which administers the Canada/United States Boundary Waters Treaty, released an "adaptive management plan" to increase **alewives** while watching smallmouth bass numbers. The plan would stop **alewives** at the Grand Lake Stream and Vanceboro dams.

On July 9, the United States Environmental Protection Agency expressed "disapproval" of Maine's policy.

State Attorney General William J. Schneider responded Aug. 8 that "Governor Paul R. LePage's Administration is committed to pursuing implementation of the Alewife Adaptive Management Plan."

A bill backed by the Passamaquoddy Tribe, with an emergency preamble, would open the Grand Falls fishway by May 1.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay will sponsor a similar bill but with no emergency preamble, Friedman said.

The state Department of Marine Resources is drafting a bill based on "adaptive management," LePage's press secretary Adrienne Bennett, and department official Jeff Nichols, said.

Adaptive management would allow more **alewives** only so long as the number of smallmouth bass does not drop, Fundy Baykeeper Matthew Abbott said Friday. "That's contingent on making a native species contingent on an introduced species."

"We don't expect **alewives** to have an impact on smallmouth bass. They (**alewives**) belong in the river," he said. "We believe that **alewives** should have access to their historic range."

Adaptive management would be "certainly not as big a step forward as we need, let's put it that way," Hudson said. "It's really tragic that there has been such a misunderstanding of the history of **alewives** in the **St. Croix** watershed."

The **St. Croix** International Waterway Commission, funded by the Maine and New Brunswick governments, favours opening more of the river to **alewives** but does not favour one bill over the other.

"We're basically neutral on the issue. We've been supporting the IJC process because it addresses everybody's issues," Pond said. "It's not perfect. I don't think there is anybody completely happy with it."

She does not believe **alewives** hurt smallmouth bass.

"The science from other watersheds is that they (**alewives**) have an overall beneficial effect," she said.

"We're happy that they're moving ahead with legislation, but the two bills that are unrestricted we have some concerns about because there is no mention of monitoring or ongoing research."

"Ultimately, we want to see a healthy watershed, but we also want to have a healthy local economy so we can stay here to enjoy it."

**Alewives** will not hurt anybody's livelihood, Paul Bisulca, a Penobscot in Oxford, Maine, a former state legislator who chaired the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, said Friday.

He scoffs at linking more **alewives** to fewer smallmouth bass. "This is the only place where this problem is alleged to exist." Smallmouth bass eat **alewives**, he said.

"We think the chances are very good" of passing the Passamaquoddy bill, he said. "It's not a done deal. It never is whenever you're dealing with lawsuits and legislation."