



CONSERVATION LAW FOUNDATION

October 2, 2008

Ernest Hilton, Chair
Maine Board of Environmental Protection
17 State House Station
Augusta, ME 04333-0017

Re: Maine Reclassification Initiative

Dear Mr. Hilton,

On behalf of the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF), I am pleased to submit these comments to supplement our testimony from the Sept. 18, 2008 hearing regarding the Maine waters reclassification initiative. CLF is a nonprofit, member-supported organization with offices in five New England states, working to protect the region's people, natural resources and communities. CLF has been involved in protection of water quality in Maine for many years, including several cases involving the waters under consideration for reclassification today.

Introduction and Legal Standards

State water quality standards are at the heart of the federal Clean Water Act's mandate to "restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters." 33 U.S.C. § 1251(a). This is not simple precatory language: embedded within the Act and its implementing regulations (both state and federal), are a set of core principals that mandate protection of existing good water quality and continuous improvement of impaired waters. Two provisions in particular are integral to the Board of Environmental Protection's consideration of this reclassification initiative.

First is the "*Anti-Degradation*" rule, which requires that existing uses of water and water quality necessary to sustain those uses must be protected and maintained. Thus, both federal and state regulations expressly require that,

"[w]here existing water quality standards specify designated uses less than those which are presently being attained, the state *shall* revise its standards to reflect the uses actually

14 Maine Street, Brunswick, Maine 04011-2026 • 207-729-7733 • Fax: 207-729-7373 • www.clf.org

MASSACHUSETTS: 62 Summer Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02110-1016 • Phone: 617-350-0990 • Fax: 617-350-4030

NEW HAMPSHIRE: 27 North Main Street, Concord, New Hampshire 03301-4930 • 603-225-3060 • Fax: 603-225-3059

RHODE ISLAND: 55 Dorrance Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903 • 401-351-1102 • Fax: 401-351-1130

VERMONT: 15 East State Street, Suite 4, Montpelier, Vermont 05602-3010 • 802-223-5992 • Fax: 802-223-0060

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being attained.” 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(i) (emphasis added). See also id. § 131.6(d); 38 M.R.S.A. § 464(4)(F)(4) (same).¹

The equally important corollary to this rule is that a state also may not downgrade a water segment’s classification if that would eliminate or impair an existing use.² See 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(h)(1).

The second key provision is a strict limitation on downgrading waters to remove designated (but not currently attained) uses. Thus, as a matter of law the Board may not recommend downgrading waters that fail to attain a designated use, where such use is attainable through implementation of effluent limitations or national performance standards.³ 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(h)(2). Furthermore, the Board may only recommend downgrading of a water segment if, after conducting a Use Attainability Analysis (UAA), the Board determines that attainment is not technically or physically possible, or that more stringent controls would result in “substantial and widespread economic and social impact.” Id. at § 131.10(g).

In summary, if a given water body currently meets a classification higher than its designated uses, the Board must recommend to the Legislature that the classification be upgraded. The Board may not recommend lowering a classification if attainment is possible through implementation of effluent standards or national performance standards, and may only recommend lowering standards after completion of a UAA.

Based on the above provisions and evidence that existing uses and water quality are higher than current water quality standards, CLF supports the proposed recommendations to upgrade water quality classifications of the following waters: the Basin & Narrows, Abbott Brook, Aunt Hanna Brook, the Kennebec River from the Shawmut Dam to Messalonskee Stream, tidal sections of the Kennebec River and its tributaries, Alder Stream and tributaries, Seboeis Stream and tributaries, Mattamiscontis Stream and tributaries, Souadabscook Stream and tributaries, Brown/Reed Brook, Crooked River at Scribner’s Mill, South River and tributaries, Little River and tributaries, Beaver Brook and tributaries, Gardner Brook and tributaries, Violette Stream and tributaries, Pemaquid River and tributaries, Ducktrap River and tributaries, the Grand Falls Flowage, the lower Androscoggin River, and the Aroostock River.

CLF also offers the following specific comments.

¹ “Existing uses” are defined as those uses actually attained in the water body on or after Nov. 28, 1978, whether or not they are included in the water quality standards. 40 C.F.R. § 131.3(e). “Designated uses,” in contrast, are those uses specified in water quality standards whether or not they are being attained. Id. at 131.3(f).

² Use of water for industrial processes is a legitimate designated use and can be considered in the reclassification initiative. Waste discharge and waste transport, however, are not legitimate uses under either federal or state law and may not be part of the Board’s consideration. 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(a); 38 M.R.S.A. § 464(4)(F)(1)(d).

³ “Attainable” means standards or uses that can be attained by imposition of either technical- or water-quality-based effluent limits or national performance standards. 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(d).

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The Lower Androscoggin River:

CLF strongly disagrees with the Department's recommendation and rationale for not upgrading this river segment. The Department has stated that proponents must provide water quality data and modeling showing "the likelihood of attainment of Class B water quality criteria at maximum licensed loads." See Reclassification Memorandum at 29. This makes no logical, legal or economic sense. First, no one operates at maximum licensed loads; rather a large buffer is generally built into all permits to avoid violations. Thus, DEP is requesting an impossible and unnecessary showing.

Second, the Department's recommendation violates the legal standard in the Clean Water Act that a state shall revise its standards to reflect uses and water quality actually being attained. 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(i). See also *id.* § 131.6(d); 38 M.R.S.A. § 464(4)(F). Thus, the Board's analysis must be based on *existing* water quality – not hypothetical modeling with point sources operating at maximum licensed discharge. Indeed, the Board is specifically prohibited from considering maximum licensed loads because both state and federal regulations prohibit consideration of waste discharge or transport as a designated use. 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(a); 38 M.R.S.A. § 464(4)(F)(1)(d).

Third, as many of the dischargers in this watershed have already recognized, water quality upgrades are generally good for surrounding communities. As has been shown over and over again, clean water is an economic boon. Examples abound throughout New England, including the recent revival of Boston Harbor, the Portland Waterfront, the Auburn Riverfront, and the resurgence of Merrymeeting Bay and the Kennebec River. The Androscoggin River deserves the same.

CLF believes that the data, including both dissolved oxygen levels and recreational uses, shows that existing uses in the lower Androscoggin have improved over time and that the river currently attains the higher bacteria and dissolved oxygen standards set forth in the Class B designation. As noted by the Department, it has no reason to question the data; indeed, it has relied upon data supplied by the proponent in prior reclassifications. Therefore, barring a showing that the data is invalid, the Board must recommend upgrading this section.

Aroostook River

The Department has made the same error regarding the Aroostook River. In this case, as noted in the reclassification memo, the Department has conclusively determined that existing water quality in the Aroostook River meets Class B standards. Therefore, as a matter of law the Board must recommend the upgrade: it cannot require a showing that the river also meets class B at maximum licensed loads. 40 C.F.R. § 131.10(i). See also *id.* §§ 131.6(d), 131.10(a); 38 M.R.S.A. § 464(4)(F). Nor, for the same reasons, can the Board or Department require a showing that the Aroostook River will also meet Class B under some future nutrient standard that has not yet been promulgated. If such a standard is promulgated prior to finalization of this process it may be considered – but, as noted before, only based on existing water quality and not upon hypothesized modeling at maximum licensed loads.

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Conclusion

In closing, we wish to convey our appreciation for the opportunity to comment. CLF remains available to answer any further questions or assist as needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen F. Hinchman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "S" and "H".

Stephen F. Hinchman,
Staff Attorney, for
Conservation Law Foundation