

Sun Journal

C+? B-? Compromise looms in river reclassification

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AUGUSTA — A bill designed to upgrade the water quality standard for the lower Androscoggin River appears to be heading toward a compromise.

Originally LD 154 set out to reclassify the lower Androscoggin River from C status to B status. Environmental groups say reclassification will ensure that the river keeps moving toward ecological recovery and support regional economic growth.

But the proposal has met stiff opposition from dam owners, paper companies and the Maine State Chamber of Commerce. All argue the legislation would create stricter and more costly pollution and permitting standards.

The bill, sponsored by Sen. Seth Goodall, D-Richmond, has also encountered push-back from the Department of Environmental Protection operating under a business-advocacy directive from Gov. Paul LePage. The DEP has said its opposition is based on modeling that showed the river didn't meet Class B standards.

The department's position is disputed by Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, a citizen organization that measured water quality levels in the river for two years. The group rejects the DEP's modeling, arguing that its own data showed the river met the B standard in 298 of 300 sample areas.

According to Goodall, the impasse has both sides considering a new subcategory for the river that creates water quality benchmarks between the B and C level.

The compromise will be discussed Tuesday when the Environmental and Natural Resources Committee holds a work session for LD 154.

Goodall said he's not entirely sold on the subclassification. However, given the political realities, he said it may be the best way to recognize that the river has improved from its current C rating while locking in a higher water quality standard.

There are a couple of sticking points. Environmental groups want to make sure that the subclassification is based on data collection, not the modeling the DEP is currently using.

In an email update sent to committee chairs last week, the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay is concerned the modeling doesn't accurately represent the water quality of the river. Ed Friedman, who heads FOMB, said that he was disappointed the majority of the environmental committee didn't support the B rating.

"It is truly sad when maybe less than 1 percent of field measurements are less than Class B, there is not more support on the committee for an upgrade," Friedman said. "It begs the question, if 99 percent compliance doesn't justify application of a goal-based standard, what would?"

Goodall said the subclassification would only be used on the Androscoggin. He worried that allowing it elsewhere would slow recovery efforts in other rivers.

The Androscoggin is the only one of Maine's three major rivers that doesn't have a B rating.

The upgrade is opposed by several groups, including the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, which testified in February that the effort to upgrade the river was "not based upon sound science."

Dam owners also oppose the upgrade. Miller Hydro Group's Mark Isaacson, manager of the Worumbo Hydroelectric Project in Lisbon Falls, said the bill would allow industries upstream to continue dumping in the Androscoggin and leave his company responsible for the lower river's water quality.

Republicans on the committee have also worried that upgrading the classification could hurt businesses.

Friedman and other environmental groups counter that a cleaner river is linked to economic growth.

"They have to understand there's a new shift," Friedman said after the February hearing. "A cleaner river has given Lewiston a river walk and a balloon festival. Brunswick has a bike path. People are looking to the rivers. They need to understand that the health of the river is directly tied to health of the economy."

However, a representative for the NewPage paper mill in Rumford said the reclassification that could be accompanied by stricter discharge limits would require significant capital investment.

The work session is scheduled for 2 p.m.

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