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Proposed bill would upgrade Androscoggin River's water classification

River advocate Peter Rubins said if approved, the reclassification would become law in time for the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, which marked the beginning of the river restoration effort.

1 Comment

By [Andrew Rice](#) Sun Journal



Anna Stavrou, left, and her daughter, Nadia, from New Hampshire, take a selfie Saturday in front of Great Falls in Lewiston while standing in Veterans Memorial Park. Stavrou, who lives in New Hampshire, but whose work often brings her to Lewiston, took the trip with her daughter to see the falls after the heavy Christmas Day rainfall. “It’s better than Niagara (Falls) because it’s so close,” Nadia said. *Andree Kehn/Sun Journal* [Buy this Photo](#)

AUBURN — A bill submitted by state Sen. Ned Claxton would upgrade the Androscoggin River’s water quality rating from Class C to Class B, which, if signed into law, would solidify a dramatic turnaround for the once-beleaguered river.

Claxton, D-Auburn, on Tuesday confirmed the recently-submitted bill, stating he hopes it can be signed into law as soon as September 2021.

As of now, the summary language states the bill would “reclassify the Androscoggin River from Gulf Island Dam (just above Lewiston-Auburn’s Great Falls) to Merrymeeting Bay (near Topsham) from Class C to Class B, based on extensive water quality testing.”

Claxton anticipates the bill will be fully written and made official sometime in January, then likely assigned to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee, which is already expecting a report on water quality from the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

He's hoping to see a committee vote by the end of March, but said COVID-19 has made scheduling difficult.

For river advocates, a reclassification would cap years of unsuccessful efforts to upgrade the river's classification.

State law stipulates that when the quality of any classified water exceeds the minimum standards of the next highest classification, that higher water quality must be maintained and protected. Class C is the minimum standard, with the scale sliding up to Class AA, the highest standard.

Peter Rubins, chairman of Grow L+A's river working group, said if approved, the reclassification would become law in time for the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, which marked the beginning of the river restoration effort.

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Rubins and several environmental organizations [have disagreed with previous recommendations](#) against reclassification from Maine DEP, arguing the lower Androscoggin River has consistently met Class B standards for years.

In every year since 2004, the lower Androscoggin River has met Class B standards for dissolved oxygen.

In 2018, the DEP recommended the classification remain at Class C for a section of the lower river between the Durham Boat Launch to Merrymeeting Bay. Its final recommendation stated that "a number of sources of pollution and stressors exist in the watershed." It said the entire Androscoggin River remains a Class C, due to "a total of 14 dams, numerous dischargers, urban centers (including Lewiston, Auburn, Brunswick and Topsham) and significant agriculture."

In a recent letter to Gov. Janet Mills, Rubins said, "Our data over the past 20 years shows that it meets Class B 99% of the time." He said a Class B designation would yield economic benefits to the area.

"It's really a matter of supporting local recreation," Claxton said. "I think fishermen, boaters and others using the river are much more likely to embrace the river if they know how much it's been cleaned up."

In late April, the City Councils in Lewiston and Auburn [signed on to support](#) the reclassification effort. Brunswick and Durham also joined.

A resolution from Auburn officials said an upgrade would not have “any significant adverse impact on current industrial uses along the river since Class B conditions have been met for years.”

Lewiston’s letter, issued on March 26, argued that industrial discharge licenses along the river “can be adjusted through cooperative efforts” between permit holders and the state.

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