



CONSERVATION GROUP LAUNCHES TO RESTORE ANDROSCOGGIN RIVER AS FEDERAL RELICENSING OF BRUNSWICK-TOPSHAM DAM BEGINS

***Once-In-A-Lifetime Chance to Reconnect the Androscoggin
to the Sea for Fish, Wildlife, and Healthy Waters for All***

Free the Andro

BRUNSWICK, ME – January, 2025 -- Local, state, and national conservation groups are banding together to launch the *Free the Andro* coalition with the goal of opening water flows and fish passage between the Androscoggin River and the ocean after more than a century of neglect and blockage at the Brunswick–Topsham dam.

Free the Andro creates a voice for the migratory fish including herring, shad, sturgeon, and Atlantic salmon that historically used Maine's third largest river to access freshwater spawning grounds. Fish populations -- and wildlife of all kinds as well as commercial fishing operations that depend on them -- have collapsed due to man-made obstructions blocking migratory fish moving to and from the Gulf of Maine.

Free the Andro is backed by founding members Maine Rivers, American Rivers, and the Merrymeeting Bay Chapter of Trout Unlimited and seeks additional members and support as it grows. Chip Spies is founder and coalition Coordinator. Chip brings extensive background in economic development in Maine and nationally, with a focus on rural communities and natural resource industries. He is joined by: Ray Minchak, President of Merrymeeting Bay Trout Unlimited; Chuck Verrill, President of Maine Rivers and the coalition's Director of Legal and Regulatory Affairs; Andrew Fisk, Northeast Regional Director for American Rivers; and Tom Walek, Director of Communications for the coalition.

“The Brunswick-Topsham dam with its active hydro-power facility is well documented as a significant obstacle to both upstream and downstream fish passage,” said Spies. “The just-beginning relicensing process of this dam by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) creates a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with all parties involved to assure that unfettered fish passage is restored to the Lower Androscoggin River to the benefit of fish, wildlife of every kind, commercial and recreational fishers, and everyone who cares about healthy, abundant rivers in our beautiful state.”

“The citizens of Maine and the residents of the Androscoggin River towns have a real opportunity to reverse the 50-year damage to the river and its fresh and saltwater fish populations caused by the Brunswick-Topsham dam,” said TU’s Minchak. “When the current license was issued in 1979, Maine US Senator Ed Muskie’s Clean Water Act was just six years old and the badly polluted Androscoggin’s ability to ever support a thriving migratory fish population was in question. In the decades that followed, Maine has dramatically improved the river’s health to the point where today we are focusing on restoring vital and abundant fish populations. We must work together to get this done for today and for future Mainers,” he said.

Andro’s History of Obstacles

The Androscoggin River at Brunswick Falls – located immediately upriver from the current Frank J. Wood Bridge on Route 201 linking Brunswick and Topsham -- has been fully or partially blocked by dams since the early 1800s. The current dam was opened in 1983 and includes a fish passage ladder hoped to enable substantial upriver fish movement. However, despite sonar readings and other observations below the dam that show as many as 10,000 shad in a holding pattern only 14 passed the fishway in 2023 and only 91 in 2024. Similarly, as many as 180,000 river herring pass the dam in a given year, but habitat analysis and historical records show that this number could easily approach 4 million fish if migration barriers are removed. An increase of that magnitude has been seen on other rivers in Maine when dams are removed or fish passage is significantly improved. But for now, migratory fish runs on the Androscoggin are essentially gone.

On February 9, 1979, FERC issued a license for operation of the Brunswick Hydroelectric Project (FERC Docket No. 2284; “the Project”). That license expires on February 28, 2029, and FERC is now considering issuing a new license pursuant to the Federal Power Act, as requested by the current licensee Brookfield White Pine Hydro LLC (BWPH), a subsidiary of Brookfield Renewable. Any new license, if granted, is expected to run for 30-50 years. This relicensing process is the only realistic opportunity to require fish passage improvement at this site for generations.

Free the Andro will fight to create unfettered native fish passage at the Brunswick-Topsham dam. The coalition will support solutions ranging from dam removal to properly vetted dam redesigns -- supported by solid data from objective research and accepted best practices -- to create free fish passage.

Further information about the dam and relicensing is available at the Brunswick Dam Fish Passage Website Hosted by Bowdoin College as a neutral clearing house. It provides historical perspective and local views on this matter and welcomes now submissions.

<https://courses.bowdoin.edu/brunswick-dam-fish-passage/local-perspectives/>

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