



Testimony before the

Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources

By Thomas Abello, Senior Policy Advisor for The Nature Conservancy

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Re: LD 800 - An Act To Prevent Passage of Alewives through the Grand Falls Dam on the St. Croix River

Senator Baker, Representative Kumiega, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources, my name is Tom Abello and I am the Senior Policy Advisor for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. I appreciate this opportunity to testify in opposition to LD 800, An Act To Prevent Passage of Alewives through the Grand Falls Dam on the St. Croix River.

The Nature Conservancy is a science-based international, nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. We work in all 50 states and in 31 countries and are supported by more than one million members. The Conservancy has been working in Maine for some 58 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing some 280,000 acres. All of our land is open to the public for a wide variety of public access opportunities including hiking, hunting and fishing. We also work across the state to restore rivers and streams to support healthy fish populations important to sport fishermen and with commercial fishermen in the Gulf of Maine to rebuild groundfish populations.

This bill requires the fishway on the Grand Falls Dam on the St. Croix River to be closed for passage of river herring into the lakes that form some of the headwaters of the river, including, Grand Falls Flowage, Big Lake, West Grand Lake and Spednic Lake.

Restoring habitat and access for sea-run fish, such as river herring, is one of The Nature Conservancy's top conservation priorities. They are a valuable source of marine-derived nutrients and are a critical food source for a wide variety of other fish, bird, and mammal species, including: striped bass, cod, pollock, largemouth and smallmouth bass, trout and salmon, ospreys, eagles, kingfishers, cormorants, mink, otter, seals, and dolphins.

Recent stock assessments reveal river herring populations have suffered steep declines as evidenced by a 93% decrease in U.S. commercial landings since the 1970s. Loss of habitat is the biggest contributor to this decline. Some 25 years ago, more than 2.5 million alewives migrated up the St. Croix River to their breeding grounds - in 2008, only 12,261 returned from the Atlantic.

These fish also an important economic role in Maine's fisheries. Commercial alewife fishermen generate substantial income from the harvesting of alewives each spring. Across the state, dozens of Maine municipalities have commercial harvesting rights to alewives on approximately 40 coastal streams and rivers. Thus, alewives provide significant revenues to the towns that lease the fishing privileges to fishermen.

Restoring migratory passage for river herring, which is the most effective way to increase their populations, could also have significant economic benefits for lobstermen and groundfishermen in the Gulf of Maine. Maine lobsterman use upwards of 100,000 metric tons of bait per year, and with the price of Atlantic herring steadily increasing, development of fresh, local alternative bait sources will boost their bottom line. Moreover, river herring species were historically a key component of the forage base for groundfish on the Maine coastal shelf. Increasing runs of river herring will help to restore that forage base and create more favorable conditions for recovery of cod, haddock and other depleted groundfish species.

We understand that some professional recreational fishing guides in the St. Croix region are concerned about the impact of river herring passage on the river's small mouth bass populations. We are sympathetic to those concerns and as an organization we strive to ensure that our conservation work across the state combines local economic benefits with natural resource benefits. Our work in the North Woods and along the Penobscot River are just two examples.

That said, the Conservancy took a hard, scientific look at the situation along the river and whether or not small mouth bass and alewives can coexist. It is our assessment and experience here, and from other states in which we work, that these two fish populations will be able to exist together – providing multiple economic benefits to Mainers. Damariscotta Lake, West Grand Lake, parts of the Penobscot River and Pushaw Lake are just a few here in Maine.

Bass have been proven to benefit, not suffer from the restoration of alewives to lakes and ponds. The evidence that alewives inhabited these waters for thousands of years is well established. Restoring alewives to these lakes for the sake of the freshwater and downstream marine fisheries and the people who live on and around these waters is important and timely.

For all of these reasons, we encourage the Committee to oppose LD 800. Thank you for this opportunity to participate in the process. I am happy to answer any questions now or in the future.