

Testimony by Tara Trinko Lake regarding the passage of river herring on the St. Croix River (LD 800)

- Senator Baker, Representative Kumiega, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources, my name is Tara Trinko Lake, a fisheries biologist based at the National Marine Fisheries Service's Maine Field Station in Orono, Maine. I am here today at the request of the Committee. So, I thank you for the invitation and opportunity to be here today.
- I am here to explain my agency's track record of support for unfettered access for river herring passage in the St. Croix, and the Agency's commitment to continue working with the State, the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and stakeholders on river herring restoration.
- I would like to start by highlighting a recent letter from Regional Administrator Bullard to Chairs Baker and Kumiega of the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources.
  - "I am writing to convey our continued support for unfettered access for river herring (i.e., sea-run alewife) in the St. Croix watershed. I have provided four recent letters conveying our record on this issue and the importance of restoring the St. Croix River's run as completely and quickly as possible (attachments 1-4). Alewives, along with other native sea-run fish, are an important prey species for many species of commercially valuable fish in the Gulf of Maine. Given the current status of those fisheries, diversifying the prey base of the Gulf of Maine is a priority goal for our agency. Fully restoring alewife runs throughout the St. Croix watershed, which has the potential to be the largest such run in the Gulf of Maine, would be a substantial step toward that goal.
  - In addition, my agency has regulatory responsibilities to protect imperiled species. We recently reviewed the status of alewife and blueback herring throughout their range under the Endangered Species Act. In 2011, we were petitioned to list both species as threatened. In August 2013, we concluded that listing river herring as threatened was not warranted, in part because of the recent and ongoing restoration initiatives in Maine. We did, however, recognize that there are significant data gaps for both of these species and uncertainties associated with the available data. In order to address the data gaps and implement proactive conservation efforts throughout the full range of both species, we undertook a significant effort in partnership with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission by establishing a technical expert working group for river herring. This group is comprised of over 80 river herring experts from Canada to South Carolina. We have been actively engaged in the work of the technical expert working group to identify and mitigate threats to both species, develop a conservation plan for river herring, as well as provide continued financial support for many on-the-ground restoration and research projects from Maine to South Carolina.
  - Since 2013, we (along with partners from the Passamaquoddy Tribe, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, among others) have been particularly active in the St. Croix River. Indeed, the Schoodic River Statement of Cooperation (attachment 5) further affirms our recent and ongoing support for the continued collaboration in the St. Croix River. We are currently supporting ongoing fish tracking studies, river herring counts, and fish passage assessments and restoration led by the Passamaquoddy Tribe. The St. Croix River is vital to the full restoration of this species and thus, we are committed to working with our partners to ensure that they are able to access important spawning habitats in the watershed.

- Sincerely, John K. Bullard, Regional Administrator, National Marine Fisheries Service”
- In 2013, my agency was invited to testify before the Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources, regarding fish passage in the St. Croix. During our testimony, we reiterated the National Marine Fisheries Service’s support for unfettered access to the St. Croix River and long-term commitment to sea-run fish restoration in the watershed. We are here again in 2015 to do the same.
- Following the reopening of the fish passage facility at the Grand Falls Dam in 2013, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs has been working collectively with the Passamaquoddy tribe.
- To support this restoration in the St. Croix, my agency and the US Fish and Wildlife Service have been providing funding to continue river herring counts at the Milltown Dam fishway. In addition, we support continued fish passage assessment and fish tracking studies.
- In 2011, my agency was petitioned to list river herring (including sea-run alewife) as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. My agency concluded that the petition presented credible information, and completed a formal review of the species’ status in August 2013. While we concluded that listing river herring as threatened was not warranted, the result of the status review highlighted that fish passage was one of the greatest threats to both species, particularly, in the northeast part of their range in the United States. Further, in describing our rationale for this decision, we highlighted some very important restoration actions that had recently taken place in the state of Maine, including the opening of the fishway at Grand Falls Dam.
- After our decision in 2013, my agency committed to revisiting the status of river herring within five years. As the largest potential river herring watershed in the state of Maine, loss of the St. Croix run significantly impacts the number of fish entering the Gulf of Maine ecosystem.
- Our commitment to river herring conservation extends coastwide. In partnership with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, we are preparing a coastwide proactive conservation planning effort for river herring.
- This effort involves over 80 participants, including members of state and federal agencies, NGOS, tribal representatives, industry, and university researchers. The plan builds upon many previous and ongoing efforts to further river herring conservation, coordinate ongoing activity, and incorporate information provided by the River Herring Technical Expert Working Group.
- In conclusion, my agency has a long-standing history of support for unfettered access for river herring in the St. Croix River for two main reasons. First, alewife and blueback herring are native species in serious peril throughout the entirety of their range because of a variety of man-made factors including poor or non-existent fish passage. Second, river herring are an important component of the prey base for commercially valuable state and federally managed fisheries. Given the current status of those fisheries, diversifying the prey base of the Gulf of Maine is a

priority goal for our agency. Fully restoring alewife runs throughout the St. Croix watershed, with the potential to be the largest such run in the Gulf of Maine, would be a substantial step toward that goal.

- This concludes my testimony.
- I have provided 25 copies of my statement and the letters referenced in my statement.
- Thank you for the invitation to be here today.