

copy for
Comm. chair

Testimony of Ron Brokaw In Support of LD800

My name is Ron Brokaw from Vermont. I retired 9 years ago following a 35-year career as a fishery biologist with the Dept. of Inland Fish and Wildlife. From 1979-2006, I was the Downeast Regional Fishery Biologist responsible for management of the fishery resources in Washington and Hancock Counties. During my career, I learned a lot about interactions of various fish species from my fieldwork and that of my colleagues.

I want to first give you some important background information on some waters I'll be discussing later on. West Grand Lake is one of Maine's "gem" lakes, supporting an outstanding cold-water sport fishery for landlocked salmon, lake trout, and whitefish. West Grand is one of the top 15 salmon lakes in New England as it produces good numbers of nicely shaped 17-18 inch fish. What makes this famous lake a top producer? An unusually consistent smelt population; since smelts are by far and away their preferred forage, salmon thrive here.

~~To take advantage of this attribute the Grand Lake Stream hatchery was built a long time ago. The hatchery has been substantially upgraded over the years, and produces high quality 6-8 inch spring yearling salmon, which are stocked in numerous eastern, central, and northern Maine lakes. This salmon hatchery is one of the most important in New England.~~

Grand Lake Stream, the outlet of West Grand, provides one of the top 5 river salmon fisheries in New England. Every spring hundreds of non-resident fishermen journey to this legendary stream to fly fish in fast water for salmon.

Then there is Big Lake, one of the top ten small mouth bass waters in Maine. This water is also very popular with non-residents, who enjoy catching good numbers of feisty 13-17 inch smallmouths. It's estimated that these 3 outstanding fisheries generate upwards of \$5-6 million annually for the local economy.

The point I hope you'll keep in mind from this brief overview is that the upper St. Croix River is not just another Maine river. Rather, it's a priceless natural resource area supporting three exceptionally high-quality sport fisheries of not merely statewide significance but also of regional New England significance. Therefore, it should not surprise you that the area guides, sporting camp owners, small business owners, and fisherman are so passionate in their efforts to protect this area. I share their passion and can sum up our mutual philosophy in eleven words; "Don't mess with a great thing", and "Don't take any unnecessary chances."

Next, I'll move on to an event of 30 years ago which, in hindsight, set the stage for our gathering today. In 1985 an unusually large alewife run swarmed up the St. Croix. Upon confirming that there were many alewives in Big Lake, thanks to the initiative of my assistant, Rick Jordan, we placed a blocking screen in the West Grand fishway to keep alewives out of the lake. We did so because, even back then, we were aware of some reports which indicated that juvenile alewives could out-compete smelt for food, thereby fostering a decline in smelt abundance. Neither Rick nor I wished to subject the critically important smelt population to this threat. For years, it has been known that alewives carry certain pathogens, which are not currently found in some of our inland waters, and could be transferred to other fish or into the lake water such as West Grand Lake, the water source for the Grand Lake Stream Hatchery. Ever since that day 30 years ago, when we installed the blocking screen, it has been the firm, non-negotiable policy of the Dept. of Inland Fish and Wildlife to prevent alewives from getting into West Grand.

During countless meetings I attended over many years with alewife biologists (after alewives had been blocked at Grand Falls Dam), in every instance, where some sort of compromise was proposed, the wording was always “alewives shall be allowed up river passage as far as the West Grand Dam on the West Branch.” Through all the discussions and debates, it was well understood by both the pro and anti-alewife factions that the West Grand Dam marked the up-river access limit.

I'll conclude by explaining why I support this bill. A short while ago, I was stunned and extremely upset to read about a proposed change which would supersede the 30 year state of Maine biologically sound policy to block alewives at the West Grand Dam. As some of you know, this dam is currently undergoing a federally mandated re-licensing process. As part of this, a draft Environmental Assessment is prepared. Of course, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Biologists get the chance to submit their recommendations for inclusion in the Assessment. In those instances where they disagree with some of the procedures which were part of the prior operating license, their recommendations appear in a section entitled “Staff Alternatives”. One of their recommendations is:

“operating the West Grand Dam Fishway year round (in other words without the hydraulic jump or blocking device) would ensure that targeted species such as salmon and alewives are able to safely and efficiently migrate past the project dam.”

This recommendation from a USFWS biologist is the single most woefully misguided, biologically indefensible, potentially devastating, way too politically correct recommendation I've ever seen. It easily qualifies for inclusion in the all-time Hall of Shame. If it remains in the draft and becomes part of the final order, it opens the door for alewives to get into West Grand Lake. And if they do, the smelt population would be jeopardized and the salmon fishery justly famous throughout New England probably would be substantially diminished. One only

has to look a few miles to the east to see what could happen. In the aftermath of an illegal introduction of the invasive land locked alewife in East Grand Lake, the native smelt population took a big hit, and the salmon fishery markedly declined. In recent years, the salmon fishery has been a mere shadow of what it was 30-60 years ago when the lake was full of smelt and had no alewives. I urge the USFWS to concentrate their efforts to restore alewives to the rivers in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Southern Maine. None of these rivers can boast a gem like West Grand on their headwaters. I urge the Great State of Maine to fight tooth and nail to delete this Hall of Shame recommendation from the Environmental Assessment. Until such time as this squabble with the Feds is resolved, I'm convinced that the best course of action is to keep alewives as far away from the West Grand Dam as possible. This view is consistent with our philosophy to "Don't take any unnecessary chances".

~~Was the USFWS no goes to read or says to hear about this depressing East Grand news?~~

~~Since this bill would achieve that worthy objective, I support it, and I am hopeful that your committee will vote "ought to pass". Thank you.~~

Finally, I come to the other of my 2 most important sentences. With a clear conscience, I make this startling allegation: The Dept. of Inland Fish & Wildlife's fishery comments for the West Grand project, prepared by regional fishery biologist Greg Bun (one of my former assistants), and obviously, a vitally important component of the Environmental Assessment, were never sent into FERC, and FERC, in a gross violation of due process, either is proceeding with, or has, finalized the Environmental Assessment with no input from the Dept. which is the caretaker, on behalf of the people of the Great State of Maine, of this priceless natural resource. Supporters of this bill, and perhaps some opponents with a sense of fairness, respectfully request your assistance in getting the facts. No matter the outcome of the investigation, I urge you to report this bill "Ought to Pass".

Thanks a lot. Today marks Round 1 of our group's fight with the USFWS to keep alewives out of West Grand. We believe our chances of winning the fight will be greatly improved if you can persuade your the legislature and the house to...