



April 27, 2015

Testimony in opposition to LD 800

An Act to Prevent Passage of Alewives on the St. Croix River

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Good morning Senator Baker, Representative Kumiega and members of the Marine Resources Committee. My name is Nick Bennett. I am Staff Scientist for the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). NRCM is Maine's largest environmental advocacy group with over 16,000 members and supporters. I am testifying in opposition to LD 800.

In 2013, the Legislature started to heal a self-inflicted wound in Maine's fisheries policy by overwhelmingly voting for LD 72 to, An Act To Open the St. Croix River to River Herring reopen the St. Croix to alewives. The Senate voted 32-3 and the House 123-24 in favor of this bill. It will likely take many years for the St. Croix alewife population to really recover, but last year, 27,000 fish passed the first dam on the river. This is substantially better than the 900 or so fish that passed in 2002, but it is a far cry from the River's potential. The St. Croix should be the best alewife river in Maine based on habitat characteristics. For comparison, the alewife run in the Sebasticook is approximately three million fish.

The economic importance of alewives is clear. Maine scientists have linked the disappearance of coastal cod stocks to the dramatic decline in the number of alewives compared to historic levels. Alewives spend their lives at sea but swim up rivers to spawn in the spring. Large numbers of cod used to follow these fish close to shore, where they could be caught more easily, supplying the Maine fishing industry with a lucrative catch.

Alewives are also the preferred spring bait for Maine's lobster industry. They are particularly important now because the federal government has dramatically lowered the allowable catch of other major sources of bait for lobstermen, such as Atlantic herring and menhaden, in recent years. With fewer alewives Atlantic herring and menhaden, Maine lobstermen must import more bait from away. This is expensive, and using fish from distant places increases the likelihood of importing exotic diseases. Sometimes, Maine lobstermen must even resort to using cowhides as bait due to shortages.

With an alewife potential equal to that of the Kennebec and Penobscot rivers combined, the St. Croix could be one of the best sources of Maine bait for Maine lobstermen. Again, the St. Croix alewife run would likely be the largest in Maine if we just stopped blocking the river and allowed the existing fishways to function as designed.

There is no evidence that alewives harm other fish. Alewives and smallmouth bass coexist in water bodies throughout Maine and the East Coast of North America.

NRCM and 50 other fishing, conservation and First Nation organizations in the U.S. and Canada, including the Maine Lobsterman's Association, have all called for opening up the St. Croix.

Now it is up to this Committee, and eventually the full membership of the 126th Legislature, to right past wrongs and overturn the 1995 law blocking alewives from the St. Croix. We are confident that the Legislature will receive strong public support for doing so and that a restored St. Croix alewife run will bring the benefits alewife recovery has brought to Maine people, fish, and wildlife along other rivers.

I know that the Committee has received many documents today, but I want to call its attention to a few that I have attached because I believe others may not have included them with their testimony. These attachments are as follows:

Attachment A

This document is a discussion paper for the International Joint Commission. The excerpted section discusses the dramatic decline in osprey and eagle populations since the Legislature passed the 1995 law blocking alewives (full document available at http://www.ijc.org/rel/boards/saint/discussionpaper_alewife_oct2005.pdf).

Attachment B

This is an e-mail from IFW's eagle biologist, Charlie Todd. It describes the dramatically different fate of osprey and eagle populations on the Sebasticook River, where alewife populations have rebounded dramatically in the past decade. Osprey and eagle populations there are soaring!

Attachment C

This document is an IFW survey of Weber Pond in Bremen. It describes the excellent smallmouth bass fishing in this pond and the importance of maintaining sea run alewives' access to the pond in order to keep the bass fishing excellent.

Attachment D

Don Kleiner, Executive Director of the Maine Professional Guides Association has been one of the leading opponents of alewife restoration in the St. Croix. However, Mr. Kleiner has stated that sea run alewives are a great benefit to smallmouth bass and his guiding business in the St. George River watershed. Mr. Kleiner stated in a newsletter on his website:

In the Saint George drainage we are fortunate to have large numbers of sea run alewives that come to lay their eggs in the ponds each spring. As the small alewives begin to move back to sea with the first rains all of the predator fish begin to feed actively. Yesterday I was down in White Oak Pond with clients and many of the bass that they caught were actually potbellied from all of the feed they have been enjoying. (Full document available at <http://maineoutdoors.biz/newsletter/fall-air>)

In closing, NRCM urges the Committee to vote ought not to pass on LD 800 The 1995 law blocking alewives was a self-inflicted wound on the ecology and the economy of the St. Croix River and the entire Gulf of Maine. The time has come to let the St. Croix heal itself. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this issue, and I would be happy to take any questions.