



Saco River Corridor Commission

"Communities Working Together To Protect Our Rivers"

Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

Senate Chair, Margaret Rotundo

House Chair, Melanie Sachs

Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

Senate Chair, Stacy Brenner

House Chair, Lori Gramlich

February 16, 2023

Appropriation Committee Chairs, Senator Margaret Rotundo and Representative Melanie Sachs and Environment and Natural Resource Committee Chairs, Senator Stacy Brenner and Representative Lori Gramlich, and members of the Joint Committees, thank you for your time.

Over 50 years ago, a group of citizens gathered to discuss the importance of clean water and a plan to ensure clean water for future generations. This group approached the Maine State Legislature, and in 1971 the legislature concluded that the Saco River, and its major tributaries, the Ossipee and Little Ossipee Rivers, are rivers of great scenic beauty and unique character, with outstanding recreation opportunities and important environmental values. Due to the development trends in the area at the time, the legislature believed it was in the people's best interest to provide orderly protection and proper development values in the Saco River Corridor.

The river remains relatively unspoiled, and many of the important characteristics of the rivers are the same. Over time, development in Corridor towns, especially in York County, has increased dramatically. In 1973, these issues were discussed in the context of their importance to the region and the State. The legislature, and people, believed a system was needed to ensure the important values and characteristics of the Corridor were protected into the future. It was in this light that the Saco River Corridor Commission was created. These values found in the Saco Basin are still of immeasurable importance and intact because of the Saco River Corridor Commission's work.

There are 20 towns within the Saco River Corridor, from Fryeburg to Biddeford and Saco. Each municipality may appoint a member and an alternate to represent their town on the Commission's regional board. The Commissioners meet twice a month to review development applications within 500 feet of the Saco, Ossipee, and Little Ossipee Rivers extending up to 1,000 feet in the 100-year floodplain. Each application review includes a site visit, the review of soil information, forestry and habitat information, setback measurements, slopes, and septic designs, lot coverage, erosion and sedimentation controls, and other site specific information. Each application is digitized. The General Fund appropriations support the Water Quality Monitoring Program and some of the overhead costs of the Land-Use Regulatory Program.

The SRCC uses around 40% of General Fund appropriations to finance the water quality program. In 2001, the Commission created the RIVERS (Regional Interstate Volunteers for the Ecosystems and Rivers of Saco) monitoring program to establish a baseline of the water quality of the rivers and monitor for trouble areas that indicate declining water quality. The program currently includes 42 sample sites along 130 river miles, tested bi-weekly from May to September yearly.

The Commission works with many other regional environmental groups. The Green Mountain Conservation Group, our partner organization, monitors 28 sample sites in the Ossipee Lake Watershed. The programs have over 30 dedicated volunteers who help collect water samples. More people express interest in volunteering every year. The program encompasses one watershed, two States, and 26 towns.

The Maine DEP, New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, and the US Environmental Protection Agency approve the protocols for the monitoring program. In the last several years, sites were identified where parameters are approaching the lower limits set for class AA waters, including increases in nitrogen, phosphorus, and bacteria approaching nuisance levels. The SRCC continues monitoring these sites. Every year, the Commission analyzes the data collected for each town, including positive or negative water quality trends and recommendations to resolve any observed issues. This analysis helps towns make informed land-use decisions that may impact water quality, identify problem areas along the rivers, and resolve these problems.

The program includes *E. coli* testing weekly during the summer months at popular swimming areas. The Commission notifies towns when bacteria samples are over the acceptable State limits so the town can post advisory warnings. A sample is collected the next day to reevaluate swimming conditions. Thanks to a grant from the Maine Outdoor Heritage Fund (MOHF), the SRCC has the equipment to test bacteria levels in-house, allowing us to increase nutrient parameter sampling by 50%. In 2023, with a significant grant contribution from the MOHF, we will launch a pioneering project in environmental DNA analysis, including microbial source tracking fecal contaminants to determine their source.

The Commission works closely with member municipalities and town officials in the land-use permit process. The Commission's ESRI Arc GIS map system includes informational layers such as FEMA flood maps, land-use districts, jurisdictional boundaries, conservation areas, and individual tax map parcel information. A real-time data analysis tool was developed for the maps to allow users to see visual water quality trends. Citizens and towns can see the big picture of water quality throughout southern Maine. A new dashboard notification system on the SRCC website will display bacteria levels at each site, warning if the levels are unsafe for public use.

People's interest in living in Maine has increased, especially along a water body. The pace of development along the river corridors continues to increase. In 2022, the Commission reviewed around 120 applications for development in the Corridor, double the average received before 2019 (60-70). For the Commission's appropriation of \$46,960, the State of Maine receives the benefit of thousands of hours of work annually and expertise from over 60 volunteers and staff protecting the waterways.

The other major contribution to the Commission's budget is from a special revenue fund known as "The Saco River Corridor Fund," established by the legislature in 1997, whereby the Commission collects a 1% fee on the sale of water and fire protection services by a "Water Utility" which draws water from the Saco River for sale and distribution. The amount collected has increased as the Maine Water Company expanded operations and implemented a rate increase in 2021.

The Saco River is relied upon for drinking water in Biddeford, Saco, Old Orchard Beach, and portions of Scarborough. Other towns in the region are also clients of the Maine Water Company. The Commission accomplishes a great deal, fueled by dedicated volunteers from our communities who protect southern Maine's natural resources through land-use water quality oversight. Thank you for your continued support, time, and dedication to our State.

Sincerely,



Dalyn Houser

Executive Director