

**LD 1049 Testimony**  
**Nels Kramer**

**April 24, 2023**

Senator LaFountain, Representative Landry, Members of the Joint Standing Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Committee:

Good morning. My name is Nels Kramer and I am here to testify in favor of LD 1049. I had the extraordinary pleasure of working as a Inland Fisheries Fisheries Biologist in the Penobscot Region for 36 years. That region covers all lakes, ponds, rivers and streams from Old Town to north of Patten and from the western edge of Baxter State Park to the Canadian Border at East Grand Lake! I am now retired.

Invasive fish species have been a particular concern to me for a very long time. When I started working with the founding fisheries biologists of Maine, the one topic that was always a very sore subject to all was the spread of invasive fish species throughout Maine. This state has long been known for the incredible fishing opportunities for native landlocked salmon, brook trout, Arctic charr, lake trout and whitefish. Maine has built an outstanding reputation for the awesome fishing opportunities for these iconic fish species that contribute over \$330 million annually to Maine's economy!

Even in the relatively short time that I have been around, non-native and invasive fish species have made their way throughout much of Maine. Smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, muskellunge, Northern pike, black crappie, white catfish fish and other invasive fish species are turning up most everywhere imaginable! Almost seems like a daily occurrence that there is a report of a non-native that is found in a lake or pond throughout the state.

In 2003, I received a call at the Penobscot Regional Office in Enfield from a campowner on Pushaw Lake that someone in his family had caught what at first glance appeared to be a very large chain pickerel. However, after taking a second look they became suspicious that what they were looking at was not a pickerel, but in fact a Northern pike! They had dispatched the suspected pike and send me a picture. It was in fact a pike which started an investigation into the origin of that pike, and initiated a now 20 year effort to limit and remove Northern pike from Pushaw Lake before they could escape into the entire Penobscot Drainage. We knew going in that it would be almost impossible, but we had no choice but put every effort at our disposal to try to eradicate them from the system.

We trapnetted spawning pike in late winter/early spring throughout the greater Pushaw sub-drainage including Pushaw Lake, Little Pushaw Pond and Pushaw Stream. While we did capture and kill hundreds of spawning pike, it was certainly an uphill battle. We initiated control measures at all upriver dams with fishways to attempt to prevent

passage above. We worked with Dept. of Marine Resources (DMR) and Brookfield Power to monitor and prevent passage of pike through any and all dams with fishways where invasive fish species could be intercepted and removed from the river. While we were somewhat successful in possibly temporarily limiting their expansion throughout the Penobscot Drainage, nothing is for sure, and with dam removal it is now possible that pike could be distributed throughout the system eventually!

On September 1, 2009 the Commissioners of Inland Fish & Wildlife and Marine Resources signed an MOU to maintain barriers in fishways on the Penobscot and Piscataquis Rivers to prevent any upstream movement of invasive species or until such time that invasive species are identified upstream of those barriers, or Phase 3 alewife restoration has begun.

The threat of invasive pike getting upriver into some of our most cherished landlocked salmon, brook trout, lake trout and whitefish waters prompted Sen. Paul Davis to introduce LD 134 in 2011 to block invasive species passage at Sebec Lake and at Sebec River in Milo. Sen. Davis followed that effort in 2012 with LD 1849 to prevent passage at dams at Schoodic Lake and Seboeis Lake. That bill was also enacted by the Legislature and has greatly enhanced efforts at preventing the expansion of non-native invasive species up through the Piscataquis Watershed!

The Howland Bypass was constructed in 2015 and became operational in 2016, then allowing invasive species, including Northern pike, free swim to the Piscataquis River. And as part of the MOU signed in 2009 there needed to be a Risk Assessment completed for the entire Penobscot River upstream from West Enfield, which has never been done! The barrier at West Enfield was removed in violation of that agreement, and consequently Northern pike and other invasive species can pass freely upriver at that facility! Because of the installation of the bypass at the Howland Dam and the removal of the of the barrier at West Enfield Dam, the risk has increased exponentially to both the Piscataquis and Penobscot Rivers!

I was alerted last year that FERC is in the process of relicensing a number of dams on the West Branch Penobscot, including East Millinocket Dam, Dolby Dam, Millinocket Dam, North Twin and Ripogenus Dam. Some of the topics discussed have included providing passage for alewives through these dams or removal of said dams to allow alewives to pass upstream. If that were to occur, then the only existing blockage to Northern pike, white catfish, and other invasives is at the Medway Dam.

Simply put, if sometime in the future fish passage is provided at the Medway Dam the entire West Branch of the Penobscot River would be at risk for invasion by Northern pike! Take a quick look at a map and try to comprehend just what the impact would be if this were to occur. Some of the best fishing for landlocked salmon in the State of Maine

occurs in the West Branch Penobscot, and all the lakes associated with that storied drainage, including Pemadumcook Lake, North and South Twin Lakes, Nahmakanta Lake, Ambajejus Lake, Millinocket Lake, 1<sup>st</sup> Debsconeag Lake, and all the JoMary Lakes. Notice that Baxter State Park is also located within the West Branch of the Penobscot River watershed! Imagine the consequences if pike should ever find their way into Baxter?

The planned removal of a dam in Guilford on the Piscataquis River would put that entire system upstream at risk for invasive species unless action is taken to maintain and enhance barriers at Browns Mill Dam. And if all barriers are removed on the Piscataquis River in Dover and Guilford, invasive species will decimate the wild native brook trout populations in the upper Piscataquis River and will have free run to within a couple miles of Moosehead Lake!

Native fish species are an essential reason that anglers travel to fish the watersheds above the Medway and Browns Mill Dam! It is difficult to determine exactly the economic impact if the watersheds at risk were to ever be invaded by invasive fish species, but what portion of that \$330 million statewide fisheries income would be lost to those local communities, including Millinocket, East Millinocket, Medway, Patten, Mt. Chase, Dover, Greenville, Rockwood, and Baxter State Park? It would be enormous!

In 2014 the Legislature mandated the adoption of the Maine Heritage Waters List to limit what and where Inland Fisheries and Wildlife could stock brook trout and allow the use of live fish as bait by anglers! The logic behind this initiative was to limit the spread of invasive fish species throughout Maine, especially in the areas under discussion today! Why should Maine anglers be prohibited from using live bait in a particular geographic area, but dam and barrier removal is occurring under the guise of “restoration” without any apparent concern by the same state and national agencies? Doesn't make sense to me!

With the distinct possibility of both these events happening, it is imperative that serious steps be taken now to stop the upstream expansion of all invasive species, most notably Northern pike. This bill, LD 1049, would provide a level of protection that cannot be overstated! Please pass this as soon as possible and protect our cherished native fish populations!

Thank you Senator Black for introducing and supporting this bill! It is greatly appreciated!

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