



Saco River Corridor Commission

"Communities Working Together To Protect Our Rivers"

Saco River Corridor Commission
Testimony before the Joint Committees, March 4, 2024
RE: Supplemental Budget Allocation (LD 2214)

Senator Rotundo, Chair
Representative Sachs, Chair
Senator Brenner, Chair
Representative Gramlich, Chair
And Members of the Joint Committees:

Good Morning. My name is Cheri Dunning, and I am the Executive Director of the Saco River Corridor Commission. Thank you very much for this opportunity to provide testimony for the Commission's supplemental budget request.

This past fall, after serving on the Commission as a representative from the town of Baldwin for three years, I was honored to be selected to succeed the Commission's previous Executive Director, Dalyn Houser. Ms. Houser had overseen a transformative five years of the Commission's operations, modernizing procedures, establishing improved public outreach, and enhancing the scientific rigor of our water quality monitoring program. I am pleased to speak for this organization, and I hope to build off Ms. Houser's excellent work, efficiently and effectively helping to administer the Saco River Corridor Act.

As many of you know, Maine's Legislature established the Saco River Corridor Commission in 1973 to oversee and administer the Act, which was designed to prevent inappropriate development and land uses from occurring within 500 feet of the Rivers in the Corridor and up to 1,000 feet in the 100-year floodplain, ensuring that some uses and impacts would be kept back from the most sensitive lands around our waterways. The Corridor follows the Saco River for its entire length in Maine, about 90 miles, from Saco to Fryeburg. Also included under the protections of the Act are the Saco's two major tributaries: the Ossipee and Little Ossipee Rivers. The Commission is made up of community representatives from each of the 20 municipalities along the Saco River Corridor. Each Commissioner helps to review development projects in the Corridor and to decide on other matters that infringe on the protective standards of the Act. Over its 51-year history, the Commission has continued to pursue its primary purpose -- to protect public health, safety, and quality of life in the State of Maine through the regulation of land and water uses, and protection and conservation of the region's unique and exceptional natural resources.

To support that purpose, the Commission retains staff to assist with three main programs: The Land Use Regulatory Program, concerned with the Act itself, the Water Quality Monitoring Program, established in 2001 to inform our communities and track the effectiveness of the Act,

and our Education Program, through which we aim to increase awareness of the Act, best practices for construction and recreation, and the importance of maintaining healthy rivers with healthy waters.

The Saco River is the primary source of drinking water for the cities of Saco and Biddeford, and it contributes to the drinking water supply for several other towns. The rivers of the Corridor are also an important part of the recreation economy, and both the quality of the water and the scenic, wildlife-rich appearance of lands around the rivers contribute to that economic resource. Development continues to proceed along the river as well, from revitalization projects in Saco and Biddeford, to the ongoing increase in single-family residences all along the Saco, Ossipee, and Little Ossipee. The "pandemic boom" in new construction may be waning, but development applications, river flooding repairs, and incidents of violations have been increasing. To protect water quality and to ensure the rivers continue to retain their scenic character and wildlife habitats despite ongoing growth and new challenges, the Commission's work is just as important now as it was in 1973. I feel proud to be a part of its ongoing legacy.

To support the essential work of the Commission, Maine's 118th Legislature revised the Saco River Corridor Act by adding §969 and creating the Saco River Corridor Fund. This dedicated account collects a 1% fee on the sale of water by utilities that draw from the Saco River or its groundwater. This Fund has become an essential part of protecting the Saco River Corridor, as it provides support for our regulatory work, our crucial water quality monitoring program, and our educational outreach efforts, all in the face of increasing pressures within our jurisdiction. This Fund was designed to scale with the use of water from the Saco, recognizing that as use increases, so do challenges to the maintenance of the Saco's water quality.

The revenue reaching the Saco River Corridor Fund has been rising in recent years, due to a 3-year increase in rates approved by the Public Utilities Commission, and by the slow overall increase in water drawn from the Saco River, which is expected to continue rising over time, as it has since 1997. Even before the recent rate increases, actual revenues reaching the Fund's account were higher than the quarterly allocations made to the Saco River Corridor Commission. This has led to the necessity for annual financial orders to retrieve additional funds from this dedicated source.

Taking into account the increased revenues to the Saco River Corridor Fund, and the increased work of the Commission that this funding supports, we are at this time requesting that the annual allocation from this fund be raised by \$50,000 annually. This change will improve the ability of the Commission's office to maintain a stable financial outlook, helping to support the steady application of the Saco River Corridor Act, as well as our water quality monitoring and outreach to our communities.

I thank you all very much for this opportunity to address the Joint Committees and speak to the need for increased allocation from the Saco River Corridor Fund. I appreciate your time and attention.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cheri Dunning". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom left of the page.