



Saco River Corridor Commission

"Communities Working Together To Protect Our Rivers"

March 4, 2021

Appropriation Committee Chairs, Senator Cathy Breen and Representative Teresa Pierce and Environment and Natural Resource Chairs, Senator Stacy Brenner and Representative Ralph Tucker, and members of the Joint Committees, thank you for your time and consideration of the Saco River Corridor Commission's programs.

Over 47 years ago, a group of citizens from the Saco River Basin gathered to discuss the importance of clean water and a plan that would ensure clean water for future generations to come. This group approached the Maine State Legislature with their concerns and ideas. In 1971, the 105th Maine State Legislature concluded that the Saco River, and its major tributaries, the Ossipee and Little Ossipee Rivers, "are natural rivers of great scenic beauty and unique character, possessing outstanding recreational, historical, educational, scientific, cultural, wilderness and environmental values of great present and future benefit to this generation and all succeeding generations." The Legislature further found, "due to their locations and the trends which are threatening their values that it is in the best interests of the people of the State to provide for the orderly protection and proper development of the values of the Saco River Corridor." To make sense of these conclusions the legislature established the Saco River Corridor and subsequently created the Saco River Corridor Commission (SRCC) to carry out the purpose of the Saco River Corridor Act.

Today very little has changed. The river is relatively unspoiled, and many of the important characteristics of the rivers are the same. If anything, the one major issue that has changed is the threat of development. Over time, development in Corridor towns, especially in York County, has increased dramatically. When these issues were originally discussed in 1973, they were discussed in the context of their importance to the region and the State. At that time, the legislature was concerned that a system was needed to ensure that all of the existing 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 still intact because of the Saco River Corridor Commission's work. For 47 years, the Commission has been protecting the Saco, Ossipee, and Little Ossipee Rivers, an important source of drinking water, through development oversight.

The priorities of the Commission's programs include:

- ensuring the drinking water quality that currently exists in the Saco River basin is preserved;
- preserving the visually scenic quality of the Corridor, with a rural character that supports the tourist economy of the region, and maintaining high quality natural resource values;
- providing the Corridor town population with the information they need to make informed decisions concerning land and water use within the Corridor; and
- conserving and protecting the unique characteristics of the Saco River Basin.

There are 20 towns within the Saco River Corridor, beginning in Fryeburg, Maine, and following the rivers to the ocean in Biddeford and Saco. Each of these municipalities has an opportunity to appoint a member and an alternate to represent their town on the Commission's regional board. The Commissioners serve 3-year terms and meet twice a month to review development applications along the rivers. Commission jurisdiction lies within 500 feet of the Saco, Ossipee, and Little Ossipee Rivers and extends up to 1,000 feet from the rivers in areas of the 100-year floodplain. Within this Corridor, the Commission oversees three main program elements. First, the Land-Use Regulatory Program, in effect as Maine State law since 1973. Second is the Saco River Basin Water Quality Monitoring Program that began in 2001, and third a conservation and environmental education component. The Commission's programs protect public health, safety, and quality of life for the State of Maine by regulating land and water uses and protecting and conserving the region's unique and exceptional natural resources.

The Commission uses 40% of the General Fund appropriations received to finance the water quality program. In 2001, the Commission created the RIVERS (Regional Interstate Volunteers for the Ecosystems and Rivers

P.O. Box 288 - Cornish, Maine 04020-0288 - (207) 625-8123 Fax (207) 625-7050 Email: srcc@srcc-maine.org

of Saco) water quality monitoring program to establish a baseline of the water quality of the rivers within the Corridor and monitor for hotspots or trouble areas that may indicate declining water quality. The program includes 37 sampling sites along 130 river miles, tested bi-weekly from May to September every year.

Recognizing that the surface water in the Saco Basin originates in New Hampshire, the Commission staff works with N.H. County Conservation Districts, the staff at the N.H. Department of Environmental Services (DES), the counterpart to our Maine DEP, and with other conservation groups working in the watershed. As part of the program, the Green Mountain Conservation Group monitors 28 sample site locations in the Ossipee Lake Watershed. The programs have over 30 dedicated volunteers who help staff collect water samples throughout the entire Saco River Watershed. The program is designed as one water quality monitoring program that encompasses one watershed, two States, and 26 towns.

The ME DEP, NH DES, and EPA renewed the Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) for the program in 2020. The renewal process occurs every five years and ensures quality control, so the data collected is scientifically sound and useful for the State. Systematic water quality monitoring of the Saco River drainage, Ossipee lake, or its tributaries had not occurred before this program. Currently, 30 sites are tested for non-point source contaminants. These non-point sources include pollution-producing entities not tied to a specific origin, such as failing septic systems, runoff, washing pollutants from roads into water bodies, and runoff carrying sediment and agricultural chemicals from lawns and fields.

The importance of this data cannot be overstated. Last year's sampling identified specific sites where tested parameters are approaching the lower limits set for class AA waters, thus indicating diminished water quality. Sampling identified increases in nitrogen, phosphorus, and bacteria approaching nuisance levels at certain sites. The SRCC staff and volunteers will continue to monitor these sites for improvement or decline. Every year, the Commission analyzes the data collected for each town, including positive or negative trends to water quality and recommendations to resolve any issues observed. 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 and recreational areas to protect public health. The Commission notifies the town when E. coli samples are over the acceptable State limits so the town can post an advisory warning at the beach or recreational area. A sample is collected the next day to reevaluate swimming conditions. This program is also utilized by the towns and the Maine Water Company as a potential early warning system for their public water supply operations.

The Commission works closely with member municipalities coordinating with Code Enforcement officers, town management, regional and town planners, and citizens to ensure proper development and planning in the Corridor across the board. The collaboration the Commission's work promotes between State, local, and regional agencies fosters a high degree of teamwork to achieve the mutual goal of appropriate and planned development that will not diminish our communities' natural resources, or the quality of life in the region. The Commission has an ESRI, Arc-Online digital mapping system that shows the Commission's jurisdictional boundaries throughout the Corridor in all 20 municipalities. The mapping system includes informational layers such as FEMA flood maps, Corridor districts, jurisdictional boundaries, conservation areas, and individual tax map parcel information. This system is available to the public, and municipalities and citizens heavily rely on the maps to plan appropriate and balanced land uses within the Corridor. The mapping system has dramatically increased the Commission's ability to navigate complex and difficult land ownership issues, boundaries, and other development concerns.

For the past year, the Commission has been working in collaboration with FB Environmental and the Green Mountain Conservation Group on a report of a 10-year analysis of the water quality of the Saco River Basin. The report will include an analysis of the data collected from the SRCC's water quality monitoring program. The report's findings will be used to work with Corridor towns to resolve potential long term water quality issues. A real-time data analysis tool is being developed for the Arc map system that will allow users to see each sample site's water quality trends visually. Citizens and towns will have the ability to see the big picture of the state of existing water quality in their town and throughout Western Maine.

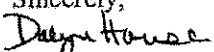
The Commission also provides public outreach and education through programs with local schools and public meetings. The Commission prioritizes public education within our communities to encourage the stewardship of the Corridor's natural resources. The Saco River Corridor includes a wide array of critical wildlife habitats that support a diverse wildlife population, many natural and scenic recreational opportunities, and supplies clean drinking water to our region. These assets provide ample opportunity to discuss educational topics ranging from wildlife and critical wildlife habitats to water quality and pollutants that may contaminate our waterways to topics involving drinking water sources.

The pace of development along the river corridor continues to increase. People's interest in living in Maine and especially along a water body has increased. Many people come from outside of Maine for recreation or to construct second homes. They also come here because of Maine's clean natural environment. People wish to relocate from more densely developed locations outside of Maine, where natural resources have been compromised to a great degree, to Western Maine, where resources are still abundant. It's an interesting paradox that once they arrive in Maine, they wish to recreate the very location they are trying to escape from. Often, irrational or angry arguments are provided to support their reasons for wanting to remove most of the trees on a small lot and to have a house, septic system, and lawn ten feet from the water. Maine is one of the few places in the Northeast where it is still possible to actively protect our natural resources before they are gone versus planning to restore our resources after they are gone.

For the Commission's appropriation of \$46,960, the State of Maine receives the benefit of many thousands of hours of work and expertise from over 60 volunteers and staff helping to protect the waterways and adjacent land. In 2020, the Commission reviewed 120 applications for development in the Corridor, increasing 30% from the applications reviewed in 2019. The review of each application includes a site visit to each property, a review of soils information, forestry and habitat information, measurements of setbacks and water frontage, slopes and septic designs, lot coverage, erosion and sedimentation controls, and other site specific information. Along with the recent increase in development, the Commission has increased compliance checks, tree removal site visits, and Orders requiring remediation of violations of the Act. The Commission staff visited 165 properties last year for pre-application site visits, compliance checks, tree removal requests, and violation resolution. The General Fund appropriations support the Water Quality Program and five staff members, including the Executive Director, Administrative Assistant, Compliance Evaluator, Water Quality Program Manager, and Water Quality Coordinator.

The other major contribution to the Commission's budget is generated from a special revenue fund known as "The Saco River Corridor Fund," established by the legislature in 1997, whereby the Commission collects a fee of 1% on the sale of water and fire protection services by a "Water Utility" provider which draws water from the Saco river for sale and distribution to its customers. The Maine Water Company is the only "Water Utility" provider the Commission collects this fee from. The amount collected has increased as the Maine Water Company has expanded operations and had a rate increase go into effect in December 2017.

The legislature of the 1970's created a wonderful and well thought out program in the Saco River Corridor Commission. It is no coincidence that the only river in the State to have a regional, citizen-based group watching over it is arguably the cleanest river in the State. The Saco River itself is relied upon exclusively for drinking water purposes in Biddeford, Saco, Old Orchard Beach, and portions of Scarborough. Kennebunk, Kennebunkport, and Wells are also clients of the Maine Water Company, using the drinking water when aquifer supplies are insufficient. All told, these municipalities withdraw 2 billion gallons of water from the river annually. The appropriation of \$46,960 from the State General Fund allows the Commission to preserve and protect many of the natural resource values within the Saco River Corridor and the watershed. The Commission accomplishes a lot, fueled by the dedication of volunteers from the Saco River Basin communities who want to protect this precious natural resource. Thank you for your continued support, time, and consideration.

Sincerely,

Dalyn Houser
Executive Director

