

Report from Upstream Cobbossee to Litchfield about Sea Run Fish Passage on Cobbossee Stream

Spring 2021

Thank you to the people of Litchfield for the opportunity to introduce our group, Upstream Cobbossee, and explain why we are working for sea run fish passage on Cobbossee Stream and how that might affect the New Mills Dam.

The Kennebec and Cobbossee watersheds once flourished with returning sea-run fish such as alewives that fed and supported wildlife beyond the early settlers' wildest dreams. They also soon began to build dams including seven in downtown Gardiner below Pleasant Pond. Sea-run fish swimming dozens of miles into the lakes, ponds and tributaries of the watershed to spawn were now effectively barred from the entire watershed.

Dams still block sea-run fish from the Cobbossee watershed and that hurts the environment in numerous ways. Our group, Upstream, is dedicated to restoring sea-run fish passage in the watershed. Similar nearby efforts by other citizen groups include China Lake Outlet Stream, and the new Togus Pond fishway has been completed. Maine Department of Marine Resources biologists estimate that the Cobbossee watershed alone could easily support an annual alewife run of millions of fish with fish passage restoration.

The third dam upstream on Cobbossee Stream is the New Mills Dam, with a "head" (height) of 11.27 feet and it controls the water level on Pleasant Pond, Horseshoe Pond, and part of Cobbossee Stream. The dam is owned by three municipalities that benefit from shore land property taxes: Richmond, Litchfield and Gardiner.

Since the dam holds back Pleasant Pond, some sort of fishway will need to be designed and built to let the fish get by the dam on their own power. The New Mills Dam Committee, with representatives from each municipality, manages the dam and in the not-too-distant future will need to make important decisions. A fish passage analysis at the New Mills Dam has been completed and a report by Joseph McLean, P.E. of Acadia Civil Works was recently made public.

What is the possible impact of alewives on waters that haven't seen them for 250 years? Some, such as the Cobbossee Watershed District, are concerned that the fish will increase the phosphorus levels in lakes and reduce water clarity. We're listening but that really hasn't happened in other Maine waters with restored runs. We recognize that reconnecting waters and restoring keystone species like alewives leads to healthier ecosystems.

Each year, when alewives return to lakes and ponds in Maine they deliver a wide array of nutrients that help fuel a healthy ecosystem. One great example is the largest eastern gathering in the U.S. of American Bald Eagles, in Benton, on the Sebasticook River during its run of alewives in May. When it's over, locals joke, all that's left are a few fish scales.

The adult alewives that survive the run upstream and spawn will leave the lake within weeks. The ones that don't survive spawning or get stuck in the lake are quickly eaten by birds, mammals, and other fish. The juvenile alewives grow quickly to about 3-4" before schooling up, leaving and heading to sea in late summer and fall.

Pleasant Pond has had adult alewives stocked in it for over twenty years now. We believe water clarity and quality have improved in Pleasant Pond because of the successful efforts of watershed groups and communities to reduce the amount of phosphorus entering the pond from non-point source runoff. Years of data from lakes and ponds throughout Maine show no clear relationship between the presence of native alewives and changes in water quality.

After everything our watershed has been through and with hard-won improvements in water quality, we know restoring sea run fish passage may be seen as just one more thing to worry about. That is why Upstream is working hard to let people know what we're doing and to hear what they have to say.

In our next report, we'll outline what fish passage at New Mills Dam might look like and how Upstream is working collaboratively with groups, communities and different dam stakeholders. And for more information about Upstream, please visit our website: <https://sites.google.com/view/upstreamcobbossee/home> Thank you!

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John P. Graham, Jr.