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MAINE'S ATLANTIC SALMON RIVERS

THREAT: Dams

UNION RIVER, MAINE
PHOTO: TOBY STEPHENSON

STATE:
Maine

AT RISK:
Atlantic salmon, tribal sustenance, clean water

SUMMARY

Atlantic salmon once filled rivers across New England, but today the species is on the brink of extinction, in large part due to the habitat destruction caused by dams. State and federal agencies are considering renewing the permits and licenses of dams on three of Maine's largest salmon rivers: the Kennebec, Penobscot and Union rivers. These rivers contain substantial amounts of climate-resilient, high-quality habitat that will support wild, self-sustaining runs of Atlantic salmon – but only if the salmon are able to get upstream. The state of Maine and federal agencies must use their authority under the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and Federal Power Act to restore river health and connectivity on these rivers and ensure a future for the fish, wildlife and people that depend on them.

THE RIVERS

Wild Atlantic salmon have been wiped out from the majority of their native range across New England— returning each year to only a handful of rivers in Maine, including the Kennebec, Penobscot and Union. These salmon and rivers historically supported the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and Micmac tribes – Indigenous people who still rely on and care for these rivers.

These are the same rivers where log drives moved lumber that built the northeastern United States and powered the mills of the early industrial era. These rivers inspired former U.S. Secretary of State Ed Muskie to draft the Clean Water Act and floated Henry David Thoreau through his wildland explorations.

Maine's salmon rivers also support populations of other sea-run fish, including American shad, American eel, alewives, blueback herring, rainbow smelt, sea lamprey, Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon and striped bass.

THE THREAT

To prevent extinction of Atlantic salmon from the United States, significant action is urgently needed at dams on the Kennebec, Penobscot and Union rivers. Four dams on the Kennebec, two dams on the Union, and at least seven on the Penobscot are preventing recovery of critically endangered Atlantic salmon. These dams, owned by Brookfield Renewable Partners, face upcoming hydropower relicensing decisions that will determine the fate of these river systems for decades to come. For many years, Brookfield's dams have been violating the Endangered Species Act by killing and impairing the migration of endangered Atlantic salmon and harming water quality. The following issues must be addressed on these three rivers:

Kennebec: Since the removal of the Edwards Dam in 1999, the lower Kennebec River is now teeming with life, including the largest restored river herring run in the U.S., the largest natural aggregation of bald eagles ever recorded in the East, leaping sturgeon and thousands of American shad in downtown Waterville, within site of the Lockwood Dam. Above Lockwood Dam, it is a different story. Over the course of about 30 river miles, Lockwood and three other dams owned by Brookfield form an impenetrable barrier for sea-run fish and create nearly 27 miles of deadwater impoundments. All high-quality Atlantic salmon habitat in the Kennebec occurs above these dams. The removal of these four dams is essential for Atlantic salmon recovery in the U.S.

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Continued

SANDY RIVER (TRIBUTARY TO KENNEBEC RIVER), MAINE
PHOTO: ATLANTIC SALMON FEDERATION

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TAKE ACTION:

AmericanRivers.org/Maine2022

Penobscot: Upstream of the free-flowing section of the river reborn during the Penobscot River Restoration— a collaborative effort to balance fisheries restoration and hydropower production by removing two dams and building passage at another— are dams along the river's mainstem at Milford, West Enfield and Mattaceunk, as well as on the river's wild West Branch, all owned by Brookfield that continue to block and harm salmon and other sea-run fish. These fish must have safe, free access to the river and its tributaries so they can thrive and support the subsistence-based fisheries of the Penobscot Indian Nation.

Union: For more than a century, the Ellsworth and Graham Lake dams have cut the Union River's 500-square mile watershed off from the Gulf of Maine. Fish artificially passed upstream into the river are killed or maimed while traveling back downstream through these dams. The relicensing of this project is stalled while Brookfield litigates a denied water quality certificate issued by the state of Maine that highlighted significant water quality issues related to how these dams are operated.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Restoring passage to Maine's rivers will help save Atlantic salmon, recharge commercial marine fisheries, bring ecological and economic rebirth to the Gulf of Maine and set the stage for even more restoration efforts as native fish return or are stocked from local, conservation hatcheries. Rejuvenated fish runs in these rivers will also help fulfill long-ignored sustenance fishing and treaty promises made to the Indigenous people of Maine, who live off and steward these rivers.

The state of Maine and federal agencies, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), must use their authority under the Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act and Federal Power Act to ensure that Atlantic salmon do not go extinct in the U.S. Specifically— on the Kennebec, FERC must deny new hydropower licenses for the Shawmut Dam and NOAA must find that Brookfield's latest Species Protection Plan for salmon jeopardizes the continued existence of the species. In the Penobscot watershed, state and federal agencies must update management plans and restart Endangered Species Act consultation to make any dams on the river safe and "invisible" to migrating fish. On the Union, passage for all native species must be assured and clean water standards must be included in project permitting or the project should be decommissioned, the Ellsworth Dam removed and the Graham Lake Dam upgraded to protect the community, fisheries and water quality.

The amount of power produced by these dams today is not significant, green or responsible. It can be replaced by other environment-friendly solutions, such as solar or wind power. The time is now to reconnect these critical river systems before it is too late to save Maine's Atlantic salmon.