

Environmentalists renew call for reopening dam

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ST. STEPHEN – The Conservation Council of New Brunswick and Fundy Baykeeper are once again calling on the International Joint Commission (IJC) to order the opening of the St. Croix River to gaspereau (alewives).

Matthew Abbott, of Fundy Baykeeper, said the gaspereau (river herring) will swim up the river in a few weeks to find that the route to their historic spawning grounds remains blocked.

Since 1995 Maine state law has blocked the upstream passage of gaspereau past the Grand Falls dam and efforts to amend the prohibition have been blocked by Maine lawmakers – even though alewife passage is supported by the Maine Department of Marine Resources, the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the U.S. Department of Interior, the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Maine Lobstermen's Association and Alewife Harvesters of Maine as well as many conservation organizations and commercial fishermen.

Last June the IJC, the U.S.-Canadian governmental body with jurisdiction over the St. Croix River and its International St. Croix River Watershed Board, heard a presentation on the history and ecology of gaspereau in the St. Croix watershed during a public meeting in McAdam.

The majority of those attending that meeting supported opening up the river to gaspereau which are a critical fish species to river ecosystems, serving as a source of food for striped bass and many other fish species, birds and wildlife.

The St. Croix has one of the largest spawning habitats for gaspereau in the entire U.S. but the closure prevents 98

per cent of them from reaching their traditional spawning habitat.

Gaspereau passage has been blocked because a group of inland fishing guides believe they pose a threat to small-mouth bass, a non-native fish.

Abbott said the number of gaspereau has plummeted from 2.5 million in 1987 to a low of 900 in 2002 undermining both the freshwater ecosystem of the St. Croix and the marine ecosystem of Passamaquoddy Bay.

While the IJC has encouraged and advised the State of Maine to open the fishways to gaspereau, they have not used the full extent of their powers to order the opening of the fishways, said Abbott.

“Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence and pressure from many groups, the State of Maine has failed to fully open the river to gaspereau.”

He noted that the Senate and House chairs of the Maine Legislature's Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources said in a letter earlier this year to the IJC that the legislature will not open the fishways this year.

Since the closing of the fishways to gaspereau, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick and Fundy Baykeeper have been calling on the IJC to use its power to mandate the opening of the fishways.

“Efforts at diplomacy have not worked and further delays will only cause greater harm to the gaspereau and the St. Croix ecosystem...”

There is still time to put an end to this 15-year travesty and restore the St. Croix gaspereau to their historic spawning grounds.

“Partial restoration will not suffice. Healthy gaspereau populations are essential to the restoration of Passamaquoddy Bay as they are integral to supporting its food chain.”

