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‘Thousands’ of dead fish discovered along Androscoggin River

A local environmental group says dam turbines were the likely cause of the large-scale fish kill.
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Dead river herring littered the shores of the Androscoggin in Brunswick after a weekend mortality event. (Courtesy of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay)

Local environmental advocates say scores of river herring were killed in the turbines of the Brunswick-Topsham dam while attempting to move down the Androscoggin River recently.

Free the Andro, a local group that has been advocating for better fish passage at the dam during its federal relicensing period, has reported thousands of dead herring “lining the shores” along the river. Many of these dead fish are visible along Water Street in Brunswick.


The dam on the Androscoggin River between Brunswick and Topsham is up for federal relicensing in 2029. (Courtesy of Free the Andro)

The group said the young fish were killed while attempting to move downriver through dam turbines.

“This fish kill is, unfortunately, not a surprise,” said Free the Andro founder Chip Spies. “These occurrences are the reason we founded Free the Andro and are working to create safe and effective upstream and downstream fish passage requirements for the Brunswick dam by (the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission). This is one more, very obvious example of what is wrong with the existing facility and how it impacts migratory species that rely on the Androscoggin to complete their life cycles.”

A spokesperson for the dam owner, Brookfield Renewable, said Monday evening that the company is aware of the weekend’s fish mortality event. The hydroelectric dam has been offline since Saturday to prevent further deaths, said spokesperson David Heidrich.


Some of the dead fish observed in Brunswick after young river herring got caught in dam turbines (Courtesy of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay)

“(Brookfield White Pine Hydro) had been notified of an anticipated outmigration associated with water level changes upstream and, as is the protocol for such circumstances, implemented overnight operational shutdowns at the Brunswick Project to facilitate the safe passage of out-migrating fish,” Heidrich said in an email. “After project personnel observed fish mortality downstream of the dam on Saturday morning, we expanded those measures and shut down generation completely while we assessed conditions and coordinated with resource agencies.”

Another local environmental nonprofit, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, issued a complaint to FERC, which is currently considering relicensing the dam, on Monday. In its complaint, FOMB wrote that the only way for migratory fish to pass downstream is through a pipe immediately next to turbines.

The fish observed in Brunswick were killed by decapitation, direct concussive strikes and the sudden difference in pressure, FOMB said.

Heidrich said fish protection is an “important operational priority” for Brookfield.

“We are continuing to review the circumstances and will work closely with state and federal resource agencies to better understand what occurred,” he said.



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Spies, of Free the Andro, began hearing about the fish kill Sunday morning, he said.



Dam owners said Monday that operations had been shut down over the weekend after a large fish kill event. (Courtesy of Friends of Merrymeeting Bay)

The dam owner's license expires in 2029. In the coming years, FERC will determine whether to renew the license for another 50 years and what conditions should be imposed. This could include a new fish passage system or even dam removal.

Most fish are not making it through the current fish ladder at the Brunswick dam, en route to their historic breeding grounds, according to counts conducted by the Maine Department of Marine Resources.

"This recurring kill emphasizes that all potentially safe passage possibilities must be thoroughly vetted, including and especially dam removal; since any time safe passage is dependent on human intervention, a certain amount of failure is inevitable," Friends of Merrymeeting Bay wrote in its complaint to FERC.