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Expectations rising — Progress on the Androscoggin River

By [Bonnie Washuk, Staff Writer](#)

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AUBURN — Romeo Michaud looked at the Androscoggin River on Friday, remembering how he fished for hornpout as a boy.

Over time, he and others stopped eating the fish they caught as the river became among the most polluted in the country.

He remembered the stench and big pads of pollution floating past.

"The land was perfect, but the river was terrible," he said.

Today, Michaud, 77, strolls along the river on morning walks. In his lifetime, he's seen the Androscoggin go from clean to dirty to getting clean again.

"They've largely solved many of the problems," he said. "You don't see or smell pollution like it once was. Since I've grown up, it really has improved — a complete turnaround from what it was."

But Michaud is reluctant to swim in the river, even if the state says it's safe.

"I wouldn't want to swallow any of it," he said.

Tons of pollution are still being dumped into the Androscoggin River every day. But compared to five years ago, the water quality is improving, officials at the Maine Department of Environmental Protection say.

With a few exceptions, for the first time in decades the state is cautiously optimistic that the Androscoggin will meet its legal water-quality classification, Class C, this year. "It's incredibly exciting," said Andrew Fisk, director of DEP's Bureau of Land and Water Quality.

The exceptions to meeting Class C are that fish advisories of eating no more than six to 12 fish per year will continue, and swimming



This aerial photo of the Androscoggin River was taken Thursday by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection. The agency makes weekly floatplane flights to observe the river and to take water samples at different locations.

- Maine DEP photo



Romeo Michaud, 77, of Auburn looks over the Androscoggin River from the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Bridge on Friday. The river was a

advisories after heavy rains from Lewiston to Brunswick will stay in place. The swimming advisories will go down significantly by 2014, Fisk said.

Class C is the lowest water classification allowed by the federal Clean Water Act, but Class C is "a very good standard," Fisk said. "C is very robust. It supports indigenous species of fish. It supports salmon, cold-water fish. It is not a weak-kneed standard, by any stretch."

Critics of the state's progress aren't celebrating. They want to be able to fish and swim in the entire river. They want a plan to upgrade it to Class B, which would mean a cleaner river.

The "Andy," as it's called locally, is the only large river in Maine with the lowest classification for most its length. It's Maine's most heavily dumped-in river, environmentalists point out.

But these days, the river is clean enough to entice frequent boating, fishing and riverbank uses. Wildlife, including eagles, fish and ducks, are abundant.

More walkers and joggers, such as Michaud, enjoy Auburn's Riverwalk, a paved trail along its banks. Outdoor enthusiasts look forward to more trails being developed in Maine's newest state park in Turner.

The DEP points to other signs of progress:

— There hasn't been an algal bloom, the icky green slime, on the river since 2004.

— The cities of Lewiston and Auburn have cut the number of times, and the amount, of raw sewage that overflows during heavy rain.

— Pollution limits for the amount of organic waste dumped by paper mills have been cut.

— More oxygen, created by "bubblers," is being infused in the deep, oxygen-starved Gulf Island Pond by the mills and FPL Energy Maine Hydro. More oxygen has improved water quality, DEP officials say.

What's being dumped?

The river's largest polluters, the paper mills, have cut discharges because of 2008 orders from a citizen board.

Plus, two mills have closed. Fraser Paper of Berlin, N.H., citing the rising costs of energy, wood and chemicals, closed its pulp mill in 2006; it's papermaking plant remains open. Otis Mill, owned by Wausau, closed in 2009, leaving more than 200 without jobs at the Jay plant.

great source of recreation for Michaud during his childhood, for fishing, boating and ice-skating.

- Jose Leiva/Sun Journal
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Bill Hinkle of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection takes a water sample from the pontoon of a floatplane at the Upper Deep Hole in the lower portion of Gulf Island Pond on the Androscoggin River on Thursday.

- Maine DEP photo



An aerial view of the bubbler system that adds oxygen to the Androscoggin River at Gulf Island Pond. The two lighter-colored lines on the surface of the

After the latest license was issued in 2005, the mills and environmentalists appealed. That citizen board, officially the Board of Environmental Protection, reviewed the appeals in 2008 during a week of hearings in Auburn.

“The board said, 'We've heard all this testimony. Make the following changes,’” Fisk said.

Paper mills no longer discharge toxins, state regulators said. They do dump phosphorus and organic waste (fine wood chips and other debris) left over from the papermaking process into the water.

Together, the phosphorus and organic waste act as food that can feed algae, which depletes the oxygen in the river. That degrades water quality and stresses the fish.

For more than 20 years, much of Gulf Island Pond, water behind the dam and miles upstream, has not met water-quality standards because of a lack of oxygen and algal blooms.

“It's influenced by the weather, temperature and discharges,” said Brian Kavanah, director of the DEP's Division of Water Quality Management.

This summer is the first time the permits have been fully implemented, Kavanah said. “Up until now, there have been steps.” At the end of the summer, the DEP will determine whether the permits are working, he said.

DEP Commissioner David Littell said this year's summer data would be important, since the summer is when the river is under the most stress from warmer temperatures and a lower volume of water. The initial data is promising, “but not necessarily 100 percent compliance with Class C,” he said.

He's confident the Androscoggin is healthier because of recent regulation. Still, he said, “whether we are entirely where we need the Androscoggin to be is the question we will continue to examine.”

Critics: Not satisfied

If Gulf Island Pond finally meets class C, it would be a good step forward, said Neil Ward of the Androscoggin River Alliance. “But we need to keep it in perspective.”

Class C is “the absolute minimum protection that the law affords Maine citizens and their environment,” he said. “And it has taken almost 40 years to get there. If I were a DEP official or an executive for the paper industry, I would be pretty ashamed of that record.”

State Rep. Peggy Rotundo, D-Lewiston, echoed a complaint from the Natural Resources Council of Maine, saying there has “been no reduction in pollution coming from the Verso mill (in Jay).”

Rotundo said she doesn't want any paper mill jobs to be lost.

“I am not convinced that the mills aren't capable of keeping everyone fully employed and doing more to clean up their pollution,” she said.

water are oxygen bubbles rising to the surface.

- Maine DEP photo



This Maine Department of Environmental Protection aerial photo provided by the Natural Resources Council of Maine shows the Androscoggin River below the Verso Mill in Jay.

- Submitted photo

She questioned whether DEP has been tough enough on Verso. DEP required the mills and FPL Energy, the power company that owns the hydro dam, to extend a system of oxygen-infusing bubblers to pump more oxygen in the river to improve water quality, she said. But she's wondering if that's enough. She believes Verso's discharges into the river still need to be reduced.

DEP's Kavanah says it's not important whether the amount of discharge is coming down.

"Whether there's improvement is not required," Kavanah said. What matters is whether the mills are meeting their license limits. The licenses are constructed so that if they are, the river will be in compliance after this year, he said.

Just reducing the pollution won't necessarily fix the problems with the river, Kavanah said.

The Androscoggin is unique, he said. There's no river like it in Maine, and few in the nation. The Androscoggin is relatively short, with three active mills, a heavy use compared to other rivers.

"Then you've got this dam (at Gulf Island) creating a deep impoundment," he said. "Sometimes it acts like a lake, sometimes a river. There's no way you can bring this into attainment without putting in oxygen. You can't get there by cranking down the limits of the discharges."

Whether the numbers have gone up or down or remain flat can depend on how they're being compared and to what, because reporting criteria have changed over the years. In essence, they are not drastically different from five years ago.

Best it's been in 50 years

Verso spokeswoman Cherilee Budrick said the Jay mill has met its license requirements.

"We've had no violations for years," Budrick said. "We've accepted much more stringent limits than any other mill on this river. We've truly improved the quality of the river. This is the best this river has been in at least 50 years."

It's a far different river, considering it once emitted a putrid smell and dead fish floated upside down in its current, she said.

Algal blooms are a thing of the past.

"We're pretty happy about that," said Kenneth Gallant, the mill's environmental manager.

From 2004 to 2010, the mill has reduced organic waste discharges (known as BODs) by 17.8 percent, suspended solids (more organic waste that covers the river bottom) by 35.3 percent, and phosphorus by 15.2 percent, Gallant said.

He said Verso has done that by tightening up paper coating and other papermaking processes so fewer materials end up in the river.

Budrick said the Jay mill employs about 950 people, a significant number. "This mill is crucial to the economy. It's one of the last good-paying jobs for folks here."

But the threat of lost jobs rings hollow to Michaud, the Auburn retiree.

"They are closing, anyway, so that threat doesn't seem right," Michaud said. "You're damned if you do and damned if you don't."

Next time: Class B?

Current pollution permits will expire in September. After the mills apply for licenses, work will begin on new permits, Fisk said.

After the summer data is in, DEP will crunch numbers and figure out pollution limits for the next round. "If everything is in attainment, then the licenses are fine," Fisk said.

On the Androscoggin, the river is Class B from the New Hampshire border to Rumford; from Rumford to the ocean, it's Class C.

Fisk said he didn't know when Class B status would be considered for the entire river. It's taken 20-plus years to get Gulf Island Pond into compliance, if it is in compliance. Class B is a much tougher step.

The Clean Water Act and state policy "says that things go upward," or that water quality should get better over time, but there's no legal requirement it do so, Fisk said.

"Penobscot has gone from a C to B; the Kennebec has gone from a C to B, portions of it. So yes, in time you could see portions of the Androscoggin going from C to B," Fisk said.

Rotundo said she testified before the Legislature's Natural Resources Committee in 2009, asking that the Androscoggin be upgraded to Class B.

"We were not successful because DEP said that the data the request was based on, from Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, did not meet their standards," Rotundo said. DEP promised to collect data last summer, but heavy rain prevented that. The department says it is working on data collection this summer.

Rotundo plans to build the case next year in the Legislature for a Class B river classification, especially from Brunswick south, where the river is cleaner, and eventually in Lewiston-Auburn.

"If the data shows we aren't ready, we need to put a plan in place that will get us there soon," Rotundo said. "We need to keep pushing. Otherwise, it's not going to happen. We deserve to have a clean river running through our community."

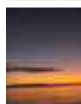
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Regional Editor Scott Thistle contributed to this report.

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locked into the muddy bottom of that river to keep it from being clean for many generations. The dams don't help they allow all this garbage to settle into the areas above the dams and the annual floods can't stir it up enough to wash it downstream into the ocean, or at least merrymetting bay.

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[**I Hope it becomes clean its really nice**](#)

Submitted by [roadwolfwalker](#) on Sun, 08/15/2010 - 06:53.

I dont seen to smell it as much when I cross the bridge going to auburn

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[**river**](#)

Submitted by badone2104 (not verified) on Sun, 08/15/2010 - 09:26.

I live on the River in Greene,Its awsum to see eagles fly by but most of all to hear the calls of the Loons.

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[Blame the Democrats](#)

Submitted by [thinkingman](#) on Sun, 08/15/2010 - 11:55.

Th Maine State Legislature - controlled by democrats for almost 40 years has time and time againt voted AGAINST increasing the clean standards for this river while voting to approve higher standards on the Kennebec and Penobscot. One needs look no further than the unionized paper mills supporting these democrats and ensuring the river stays as is. The only thing more offensive is that our local democratic legislative delegation has gone on with this for years, voting as told and not based on whats best for our community. They should be ashmed!

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