

ENVIRONMENT

Maine group says alewife battle nearly over

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ST. STEPHEN

One of the key forces behind an almost 20-year-old environmental battle is confident the battle is almost won.

Ed Friedman heads Friends of Merymeeting Bay (FOMB), a Maine-based environmental group that has spent the last two years in legal battles aiming to force the state of Maine into abandoning efforts to block indigenous river herring - alewives - from their natural spawning grounds in the St. Croix River watershed.

FOMB is behind one of three bills submitted to the Maine state legislature, all of which aimed, to one degree or the other, at restoring alewives, also known as gaspereau, to their natural habitat.

The state first passed a law to block the alewives in 1995, based on the belief the fish were somehow harmful to the invasive bass, which has grown to be a valued sportfish in northern Maine and southwest New Brunswick.

Additional bills have been put forward by the Passamaquoddy Tribe, and an internally generated document has been submitted by the Department of Marine Resources (DMR).

The bill put forward by the Passamaquoddy Tribe is designated as an "emergency" bill, requiring instant action if passed. But, noted Friedman, it requires a two-third majority to pass.

"Ours, without emergency status, just requires a majority to pass - although it will need two thirds to overcome a governor's veto," he stated.

He's "100 per cent" certain that one of the initiatives will find its way to passage, and al-

low passage to some - or all - of the alewives. The DMR bill has the blessing of Maine Governor Paul LePage.

"We stand a good chance," Friedman said. "If worst comes to worst, the governor's bill has a decent chance of passing, in terms of opposition, but I certainly hope one of the other bills (is) the one that passes."

The DMR bill, if passed, would restrict alewife access to some waters, and also limits access by fish count.

Bass fishers and fishing guides, who have vocally declared the alewife as a detriment to bass, have softened their stance, said Friedman, "Because the fishing was better, last year, down in alewife water, further down on the watershed ..."

Similarly optimistic is Abby Pond, the executive director of the St. Croix Waterway Commission. The group is tasked with overseeing the watershed's health and integrity.

"It's likely at least one of them will get through, though which one is a matter of debate," Pond said.

She called the DMR bill "the compromise that makes nobody happy," because it still blocks alewives from traditional habitat on Spednic lake.

"It links how many alewives get through to the smallmouth bass population."

There has long been a false assumption that alewives are somehow detrimental to bass, an assumption that simply doesn't hold water, Pond declared.

"The science says they can co-exist, and that the population may actually be beneficial to the smallmouth bass."

The argument against allowing alewives is largely economic, she summarized.

"Approximately 200 people

in Maine and New Brunswick rely on bass, sportsfishing, for their livelihood."

However, the jobs in both the Bay of Fundy finfishing and lobster industry that depend on healthy life cycles of fish such as alewives never seem to enter the equation, she stated.

"The science says more alewives (are) good for everybody," she said.

Friedman said his group remains committed to legal action to ensure full access of river herring to the St. Croix River watershed. It has formally declared its intent to sue the Environmental Protection Agency to force that American federal body to enforce provisions in the clean water act that ban actions that affect water quality.

The 60-day notice of intent expires in a few weeks, Friedman said.

Previous legal action launched by FOMB established the validity of the water-quality argument as a tool to remove barriers put in place in 1995.

The river is a jointly shared, international waterway, but apart from the waterway commission, there has been nothing in the way of input or pressure from Canadian agencies or politicians, Friedman noted.

"DFO has been fairly quiet," he stated. "It is odd, I think."

The waterway commission's role is about the only Canadian voice in the ongoing battle, he said.

Fundy Baykeeper Matt Abbott welcomes the bills.

"The argument against the alewife just isn't there anymore. For the good of the region, the river needs to be open. This is a big step forward."

"Come this spring, when the alewives make their run, I hope to be out there celebrating, not protesting."