

Groups say dam turbines too dangerous for smolts

Environmentalists asking judge to order temporary shutdown

The Times Record

BRUNSWICK

Two local conservation groups have asked a federal judge to order the temporary shutdown of turbines at four hydroelectric dams on the Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers this spring to save thousands of migrating Atlantic salmon.

Without a shutdown, the conservationist say young salmon — called “smolts” — will be forced through rapidly spinning turbine blades and a high percentage will be killed, in violation of the Endangered Species Act.

The dams involved are Weston, Shawmut and Lockwood dams on the Kennebec River, and a Brunswick dam on the Androscoggin River.

Environment Maine, a statewide environmental group, and Friends of Mer-

rymeeting Bay, a group dedicated to the preservation of the Merrymeeting Bay ecosystem, filed their motion for a preliminary injunction in U.S. District Court in Portland on March 14.

Representatives of the defendants — NextEra Energy Resources LLC, FPL Energy Maine Hydro LLC and affiliated companies — were not immediately available for comment today.

The dams are owned by Toronto-based Brookfield Renewable Energy Partners. A Brookfield spokesman could not be immediately reached for comment.

Gulf of Maine Atlantic salmon were listed as endangered in 2000. Five years later, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service published a recovery plan for the species — but designated no federally protected habitat for the fish.

In September 2008, the agencies proposed to designate 12,000 miles of river and 300 square miles of lakes as critical habitat.



BOB MENTZINGER / THE TIMES RECORD

TWO LOCAL CONSERVATION groups are seeking the temporary shutdown of turbines at four hydroelectric dams, including the one at a Brunswick dam on the Androscoggin River, in order to protect young salmon, called “smolts.”

The same month, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay asked the agencies to extend endangered status to Atlantic salmon in the Kennebec, Androscoggin

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and Penobscot rivers. That proposal was made final in 2009.

“It’s been nearly four years since Atlantic salmon were listed as endangered, and NextEra still has failed to take action to save these iconic fish,” said Emily Figdor, director of Environment Maine.

“The Atlantic salmon in the Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers are on the verge of extinction, yet the dam owners and government agencies continue to stall,” said

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay Chairman Ed Friedman, of Bowdoinham. “Only a federal judge can take immediate action to help save this species.”

Approximately 20,000 young salmon are expected to migrate down the Kennebec this spring and another 1,000 down the Androscoggin, the product of stepped-up state stocking efforts and a rare large return class of wild adult spawners in 2011, Friedman said.

Temporarily shutting down the turbines could save nearly half of those smolts from being killed, he said.