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Maine Voices: Kennebec dredging not business-friendly

Lobstermen, fishermen and those who rely on tourism would lose out if the governor's plan goes forward.

BATH - In a move akin to spot zoning, Gov. LePage and his new "business-friendly" DEP recently won passage of a bill in the Legislature to lower state water quality standards to allow the Army Corps of Engineers to dredge the Kennebec River this August.



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PPH Opinion

Is it worth the cost to dredge the Kennebec so BIW can deliver this ship to the Navy on time?

Carl D. Walsh/Staff Photographer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Hinchman of the Conservation Law Foundation represents the town of Phippsburg, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay and other organizations and individuals in appeals challenging the Kennebec River dredging permit.

As it turns out, that measure is not so business-friendly.

Dredging is ecologically devastating. Its impacts are so severe that every permit to dredge the Kennebec issued since the 1980s (under Democratic, Republican and independent governors) has prohibited any work in summer.

This is when the lower Kennebec River and its bays are teeming with migratory fish; when business on the river is booming, including lobstering, clamming, and guided fishing; when

endangered fish are in the river; and when the Popham Beach State Park and local restaurants, inns and campgrounds are packed with vacationers.

This year DEP reversed course, authorizing the Corps not only to dredge the channel in August, but also to overdredge 35 acres of river bottom by an extra 5 feet.

To protect their livelihoods, a diverse coalition of lobstermen, shellfish harvesters, fishing guides, hotel owners, two land trusts, the town of Phippsburg and others have appealed the dredging permit. The appeal asks the Board of Environmental Protection to scale back the dredging.

NOT AN EMERGENCY

The premise for the August dredge is that it's an "emergency." The Corps says it must dredge this summer so that Bath Iron Works can deliver the newly built USS Spruance to the Navy by September. The Corps, however, has an open permit to dredge the Kennebec in winter and could have done the work last year.

Like most small towns, Phippsburg is a tight community. Fishermen and other business owners are more than willing to do what it takes to get the Spruance safely out to sea and to ensure the viability of BIW (where many of their neighbors work). But that can be done with minimal dredging, in just a couple of shallow spots. There is no need for full-scale dredging, let alone overdredging by 5 feet, this summer.

As written, the DEP permit would allow the Corps to dredge and dump 50,000 cubic yards of spoils in-river at the Kennebec Narrows and 20,000 cubic yards near-shore at Jackknife Ledge. The ledge is prime lobster habitat and is the historic fishing grounds for the Small Point lobstermen.

Dumping 20,000 cubic yards of dredge spoils at the height of the season will wipe out the lobsters and the lobstermen alike. Yet the DEP permit does not even mention the word "lobster," let alone look for solutions to minimize impacts to this fishery. The same is true for striper fishing.

For shellfish harvesters, the concern is that silt in the dredge spoils will drift downstream, settling out on clam flats as it has in past winter dredging events. That will block air holes, making it difficult to dig and cutting harvests in half. Of greater concern, it may raise bacteria levels and close the clam flats. Worse yet, too much silt could kill off the clam spat (juveniles), which are vulnerable to changes in temperature and depth. Loss of a shellfish year class will have long-term economic effects on the town.

Even the Corps admits that August dredging is bad. So, why do full-scale dredging in August? The agency says it's cheaper to dredge once, now. But it was the Corps' bureaucratic mistakes that prevented timely dredging in the first place. Now, to spare the agency's budget, they are asking the people who live and work on the water in Phippsburg to risk their livelihoods.

If DEP was truly friendly to all Maine businesses, it should have required the Corps to take steps to minimize impacts, even if it costs more. There is no need to sacrifice Maine jobs to save what is pocket change for this very large federal agency.

COMMUNITY IN CONFLICT

The Corps' intransigence is also putting BIW in a bind. This is both a fishing and shipbuilding community -- and we need both.

As Dean Doyle Jr., chair of the Phippsburg Shellfish Conservation Commission and a licensed shellfish harvester for 16 years, said in testimony to the Legislature this spring, "My father works for the Yard. BIW put shoes on my feet and put food on the table when I was growing up. But I need to be able to work, too I want a solution that works for everyone."

Although DEP missed the boat, there is still a chance that the Board of Environmental Protection can see this case through a less politicized lens and craft a Maine solution -- one that is fair to all.

- *Special to the Telegram*

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