

Watchdog group blames Brunswick-Topsham dam operator for fish kill

By [Callie Ferguson](#) on October 20, 2016 [@calliecferguson](#)

BRUNSWICK — Operators of the Androscoggin River Dam may only face a slap on the wrist if federal regulators investigate the deaths of 500-800 fish believed to have been cut into pieces as they passed through the dam's turbines.

Volunteers with the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay said they discovered a watery grave of mutilated and decapitated fish Saturday, Oct. 15, along the banks of the river and below the Frank J. Wood Bridge.

The massive kill would put the operator in violation of Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and Maine Water Quality certificates, according to FOMB Chairman Ed Friedman.

The dam is just upstream of the bridge, which carries Route 201 over the Androscoggin River from Brunswick to Topsham. It is operated by the multi-national company Brookfield Renewable Energy.

After learning about the incident, Friedman said he contacted Brookfield's emergency line and was told officials were looking into the incident.

Friedman said Wednesday morning that the cause of the fish kill was apparently the failure of the dam's exclusionary devices, which redirect fish away from the turbines and toward a mechanism for safe passage.

"In the case of Brunswick, when the water is low" – which it is now, and so there is no spillover where the fish can pass above the dam – "the only way for the fish to pass through (the dam) is through the turbines or through that little 18-inch hole," Friedman said. "There's really not good diversion or 'excluder' around the turbines, so it's really virtually impossible for fish to find that 18-inch hole."

Friedman said alewives are skinny, and an adequate turbine grate would need holes as narrow as a half an inch. Large populations of young, and thus small, alewives are migrating downstream this month, after spawning upstream during the spring.

Brookfield did not respond by press time to questions about the dimensions of the grate in place, or about actions the company is taking in response to the FOMB report.

The FOMB volunteers discovered the dead fish while volunteers performed a routine monthly water quality test. At least one person noticed the dead fish earlier that day and posted photos to on Facebook.

Friedman was not with the volunteers at the time of the discovery. When he arrived at the scene, he said, he attempted to rule out other causes or sources of the mass kill, and walked upstream to the Brunswick canoe portage and as far upstream as the Pejepscot dam in Topsham.

Seeing no dead fish, he determined that turbines in the Brunswick-Topsham dam was the culprit and called the Brookfield emergency phone line.

FOMB is a nonprofit with more than 300 members that “preserves, protects, and improves the unique ecosystems of Merrymeeting Bay” through “education, research, membership activities, and the promotion and stewardship of conservation easements,” according to its [website](#).

Friedman said in recent years the organization has been involved in litigation to defend the safe passage of migratory fish along the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers.

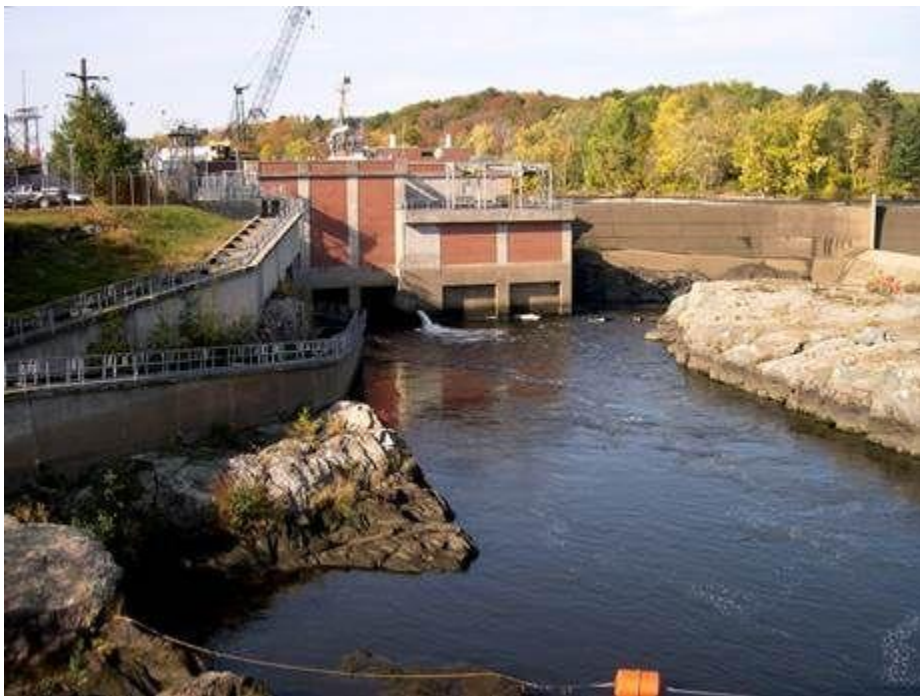
But information from a press release said the FOMB has lost most of these cases after National Oceanic Atmospheric Association fisheries, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, issued new guidelines in the form of “interim species protection plans” to violators. In light of that, the courts ruled FOMB’s cases were invalid.

“This kill is proof the ISPP’s don’t work,” Friedman said.

He plans to report the weekend incident to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which could respond by looking into the frequency and severity of the problem.

Friedman also speculated the outcome of the investigation would result in no more than a “wrist slap:” a letter of reprimand to Brookfield.

**Callie Ferguson can be reached at 781-3661 ext. 100 or cferguson@theforecaster.net.
Follow Callie on Twitter: [@calliecferguson](https://twitter.com/calliecferguson).**



A failure of devices that allow fish to escape a dam’s turbines may have caused the death of 500-800 fish last weekend on the Androscoggin River between Brunswick and Topsham.



A fish found last weekend below the Androscoggin River Dam between Brunswick and Topsham.

Photos: Ed Friedman, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay