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Maine may upgrade water quality rating for lower section of the Androscoggin River

- By Steve Collins Sun Journal
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A Maine panel is recommending a water quality classification upgrade for the lower Androscoggin River, a move that would for the first time lift a section of the river above the lowest level.

If approved by the Legislature, the river would become a Class B one from the Worumbo dam in Lisbon Falls to the sea rather than the Class C designation it's had for decades.

"We are delighted that improved water quality on this stretch of the Androscoggin is being recognized, it really benefits everyone," Ed Friedman, chairman of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, said in a prepared statement Tuesday.

But there is no guarantee that lawmakers will agree.

State Sen. Ned Claxton, an Auburn Democrat, said the proposed change urged by the Board of Environmental Protection is an important development but not the last word.

Legislators are expected next month to once again take up a bill by Claxton that seeks to upgrade the regulatory status of the river to Class B, a move that would add new environmental protection and higher standards for what can be discharged into the waterway.

Claxton said that winning the board's support for upgrading the lower section of the river will help.

But there are mills and businesses upstream that opposed the effort because they are concerned tougher environmental standards could make it difficult for them to operate under certain conditions, especially if water levels are low, and might impose new, burdensome costs.

Claxton said there is a lot to discuss on the issues.

He said, though, that upgrading the lower stretch of the Androscoggin would likely provide a boost to its use for fishing and recreation, which has been a goal for many years.

Peter Rubins of Grow L+A said in a prepared statement that the board's recommendation could help lead to an extension of Class B status all the way to Gulf Island Dam above the Great Falls in the next few years.

Claxton said the water quality improvements that allow for the upgrade are a testament to a "whole lot of cleanup" over a long period of time, including serious efforts by waste management operators for the municipalities along the river.

The Androscoggin "used to be a septic system, an open sewer," Claxton said. It has come a long way, he added.

"The twin cities of Lewiston/Auburn have done a fantastic job during the last 10 years of virtually eliminating combined sewer overflows that occur when wastewater systems are overloaded from big rain events," Rubins said.

"Their work and that of the Brunswick wastewater treatment plant has made our success possible and all who appreciate clean water owe these plants and their employees a debt of gratitude" he said.

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay said river classifications "are based primarily on ambient water quality as measured by dissolved oxygen content, E. coli bacteria, and the types and quantities of certain aquatic invertebrates found."

Claxton said the reason the river's upgrade is possible is because of a lot of work by "the citizen scientists" connected to the group, who have gathered the data to show the water quality improvement.

The state Department of Environmental Protection remains opposed to the upgrade. But the environment board, which heard extensive testimony on the issue, took a different stance for the first time in its triennial review of the Androscoggin's water quality. It has twice before gone along with those who want to leave the river as a Class C one.

Rivers in Maine are regulated differently depending on a classification that, simplistically, rates how polluted they are.

They are categorized as either an AA, A, B or C freshwater river, with AA the highest and C the lowest — though all of them must meet the minimum standards of the federal Clean Water Act of 1972, a crowning achievement of U.S. Sen. Edmund Muskie of Rumford.

The state says the classification system "should be viewed as a hierarchy of risk," with the top categories expected to be more resilient and recover more quickly after events caused by people or nature.

Basically, an AA stream would have no waste discharge into its waters or any impoundment from a dam. An A classification would have a little more risk of degradation from "very restricted discharges."

Rivers with a B rating have fewer restrictions on activities, "but still maintain high water quality criteria" that require stricter rules for discharges from treatment plants, factories or any other point where water is directed into the river.

A C-rated river, the state says, is "still good quality, but the margin of error before significant degradation might occur" is less, most likely in the case of a spill or a drought that makes dilution of discharges tougher.

The state regulates the Androscoggin River from the New Hampshire border to the Ellis River as a Class B waterway, then considers it a Class C one downstream to Merrymeeting Bay.

Claxton said this is an opportune moment for the Legislature to endorse the higher classification.

Fifty years ago, he said, Congress passed the clean water bill pushed by Muskie, who saw as a youngster the river at its most polluted.

A desire to clean up the Androscoggin was part of his motivation for the landmark environmental bill he promoted.

Claxton said Maine has done "an exemplary job" of cleaning up its waterways in the decades since Muskie put the issue on the national agenda.

The Merrymeeting Bay group said it hopes legislators "will understand the symbolism inherent in recognizing the Act's success on the Androscoggin, as evidenced by recent, actual data and approve the recommended upgrade."

Claxton said the half century mark would be a good moment to put the state's stamp of approval on all the work that's been done to make Muskie's river cleaner.

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