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Conservation group presses Brunswick dam owner to clear debris blocking fish ladder

Brookfield Renewable said it's working as quickly and safely as possible to clear the blockage.



By [Jason Claffey](#) Times Record



A logjam at Brookfield Renewable's hydroelectric dam in Brunswick. *Courtesy of Ed Friedman / Point of View Helicopter Services*

A local conservation group this week filed a federal complaint pressing the owner of Brunswick's hydroelectric dam to clear a large debris jam in its fish ladder.

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay filed the complaint with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on Monday. The jam at Brookfield Renewable's dam developed after an April 29 rainstorm dumped up to 6 inches of rain on the region. Migratory fish like alewives, blueback herring, American shad, sea lamprey and the endangered Atlantic salmon use the ladder, a staircase-like structure, to access spawning grounds up the Androscoggin River.



A Brookfield Renewable spokesperson said the company had to wait a week until high water levels from a rainstorm receded to safely clear a logjam at its Brunswick hydroelectric dam.

Courtesy of Brookfield Renewable

“Having seen no action in the last week and a half, we wanted to make sure (the regulatory commission) knew about this and hopefully apply a little pressure to let (Brookfield Renewable) know folks are watching and concerned about it,” said Ed Friedman, chairperson of the conservation group.

David Heidrich, a spokesperson for Brookfield Renewable, said the company is working to clear the blockage as quickly and safely as possible. The company is required by the state to open the ladder each year from May 1 to Oct. 31 and maintain it. Heidrich said raging waters from the rainstorm prevented workers from clearing the blockage until Monday, when water levels receded.

“We had to wait until it was safe,” Heidrich said. “The last thing we’re going to do is put someone’s life in jeopardy.”

He said workers have to manually remove pieces of wood by hand, as overhead transmission lines prevent using a crane. He could not give a timeframe for when the blockage will be cleared and the fish ladder opened but indicated it will likely be in a matter of days.

“We’re working to make sure it’s done sooner rather than later,” he said.

He said the company notified the state Department of Marine Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service about the blockage.

About a week before the storm, Friedman said he noticed the rocks below the dam were covered with cormorant birds, which eat alewives — signifying the fish had arrived for the season and were ready to go up the fish ladder. Friedman, a Bowdoin-based helicopter pilot and owner of Point of View Helicopter Services, took aerial photos of the logjam Saturday.

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay have been advocating for a replacement to the fish ladder, claiming it's ineffective. The ladder is too close to the dam's spinning turbines, resulting in fish getting hit and injured or killed, while fish like American shad don't like enclosed spaces and simply don't use the ladder, according to Friedman. The group says a fish elevator, where fish are channeled into a hopper and raised above the dam, would be more effective.

In 2016, the group [filed another complaint](#) with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission against Brookfield Renewable, alleging thousands of fish were killed by the dam's turbines.

Friedman said the fish will face more stress from [the new Frank J. Wood Bridge](#) because it will cast a shadow on the ladder, making it harder for fish to see where they're going.

"It's confusing for the fish," Friedman said. "Something needs to be done."