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Group calls for removal or redesign of Brunswick, Topsham dam

The newly formed coalition "Free the Andro" aims to open water flows between the Androscoggin River and the ocean.

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The Brunswick dam fish-viewing window maintained by Brookfield Renewable is shown in 2020. A new coalition called “Free the Andro” is calling for free fish passage amid the dam’s federal relicensing process. *File photo*

National and local conservation groups have joined together as the “Free the Andro” coalition to push for open water flows on a major river that winds between Brunswick and Topsham.

The group — formed by Maine Rivers, American Rivers and the Merrymeeting Bay Chapter of Trout Unlimited — announced Monday that it plans to fight for “unfettered native fish passage at the Brunswick-Topsham dam,” located just upstream of the [Frank J. Wood Bridge](#). The group is calling for either dam removal or redesign as the dam’s license comes up for renewal.

“The Brunswick-Topsham dam, with its active hydropower facility, is well-documented as a significant obstacle to both upstream and downstream fish passage,” said Chip Spies, the coalition founder and coordinator. “The just-beginning relicensing process of this dam by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission creates a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work with all parties involved to assure that unfettered fish passage is restored to the Lower Androscoggin River to the benefit of fish, wildlife of every kind, commercial and recreational fishers, and everyone who cares about healthy, abundant rivers in our beautiful state.”

The push for the dam redesign or removal on Maine’s second-longest river comes amid ongoing debates on dams across the state as infrastructure ages and communities become more attuned to impacts dams can have on wildlife. Spies said that when addressing issues such as dams, a “broader voice is a better voice.”

The license for the dam’s operation, which the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) issued in 1979, ends on Feb. 28, 2029. Free the Andro said that the only realistic way to implement change for fish passage is while the commission considers a license renewal for the current licensee, Brookfield White Pine Hydro LLC — a subsidiary of Brookfield Renewable.

A spokesperson for Brookfield White Pine Hydro said that the relicensing process for a hydroelectric project entails many years of studies, consultations with federal and state agencies, and opportunities for the public to provide input for a multi-decade license term.

“We consider the results of our studies, including those focused on fish passage, and the input of all stakeholders before preparing and submitting a final license application to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission,” the spokesperson said. “We are working on studies as part of the relicensing of the Project that will review measures to modify or replace the existing fish passage.”

Flux of Maine dams

Dams across the state are seeking to continue operations as licenses approach their end — a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity for organizations like Free the Andro to implement better infrastructure for fish passage.

Four dams on the Kennebec River are up for relicensing, two of which are said to prevent salmon from reaching prime spawning grounds at the Sandy River. The [residents](#) and [environmental groups](#) like Natural Resources Council of Maine, Kennebec Coalition and the Atlantic Salmon Federation have repeatedly asked for removal of these dams.

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The FERC is [considering](#) relicensing one of the Kennebec dams, the Shawmut, and amending the licenses of the other three (Weston, Lockwood and Hydro Kennebec) to require the operator, Brookfield Renewable, to install fish passageways at each site.

A Maine Monitor [series](#) also revealed that Maine's aging dams face uncertain futures as communities see relicensing as controversial and that, despite growing risks of climate change to dams, [state programs](#) that enforce safety are understaffed and underfunded.

The twist is that the dams, many of which are decades old, provide renewable energy — a valued resource as towns across the state adopt [Climate Action Plans](#) and look to a future of fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

Brookfield Renewable's website states that the Brunswick dam has the capacity to provide 16 megawatts of hydropower to the New England power market. It also produces more than 90,000 megawatt hours of electricity annually — enough to power more than 13,500 homes each year.

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Spies acknowledged that the Androscoggin dam produces hydropower. With the license renewal several years down the road, he said that right now the focus is to follow the data collection process that precedes the renewal. In this process, he said that Maine agencies will look at water flows above and below the dam, how fish are impacted, and ways to move fish through the structures.

“This is not a process that happens overnight,” he said. “... We will definitely be involved in helping review and understand the data [in] the study.”

Counting fish

A dam has existed in some form on the Androscoggin between Topsham and Brunswick since 1753. The current structure was completed in May 1983 and included a \$2 million fish ladder, according to the Central Maine Power archival collection at [Maine Historical Society](#).

Spies described the dam's current fish ladder — a stairway-like structure that allows fish to pass through — as “not very effective.”

Free the Andro further stated that this ladder, while a hopeful initiative to enable fish movement, ultimately limited passageway to Gulf of Maine of migratory fish species, including herring, shad, sturgeon and Atlantic salmon.

The coalition also pointed to years of blockages and “neglect” at the dam as a barrier for the fish. Just last year, local organization Friends of Merrymeeting Bay filed a [complaint](#) against Brookfield Renewable with FERC after a jam formed on the fish ladder following heavy rainfall.

Maine Department of Marine Resources data for the Brunswick-Topsham dam show fish counts for salmon, herring and shad yo-yoing extremely over the course of the past decade.

Between 2023 and 2024 data, Atlantic salmon counts have declined, but shad and herring counts have risen. Compared to 2022 data, however, counts have lowered. River herring counts decreased by just over 19%, while Atlantic salmon and shad counts decreased 64.7% and 60% respectively since 2022.

Free the Andro also argues that as many as 4 million fish could be passing through the river if the migration barriers were removed, but that migration passage at this point on the river now is essentially “gone.”

Spies argued that the least costly and most effective option for fish passage is removal of the dam altogether. He also pointed to the impact dams have on local waterfront economies downstream: allowing fish populations like river herring and shad reach their spawning grounds directly effects lobster and ground fishery industries downstream.

Lobsters, for instance, [hunt](#) for a variety of foods, such as fish or clams. Migratory fish like herring can be a usual [bait](#) for lobstermen downstream from the dam.

“It’s a broad interest that people should have from the recreational side, the aesthetic side, the continual improvement of the river right down to the economics of our lobstermen and fishermen along our coast,” Spies said.