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## Androscoggin River, once a ‘national disgrace’, should be recognized for cleanup efforts, advocates say

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LEWISTON — Over 50 years after U.S. Sen. Edmund Muskie helped usher in the federal Clean Water Act, the Androscoggin River, which he once called “a national disgrace” for its pollution, may be on the verge of a momentous milestone.

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is considering upgrading the classification of key stretches of the river, including through Lewiston-Auburn, from the current lowest-quality designation. Such a move would reflect years of improvement to a river that was once emblematic of industrial contamination.

Advocates for the redesignation say such official recognition of the river’s recovery would contribute to the region’s economy, bringing visitors and business investment to the area.

### YEARS OF ADVOCACY

The push to reclassify the river’s water quality from Class C to Class B comes as the Department of Environmental Protection seeks public input as part of a three-year review process. It will consider that input this summer.

The state uses a classification system from Class D to Class AA to set water quality levels, and to establish designated uses for the river. Class AA waters require the highest protection; Class A waters are suitable for drinking after treatment, fishing, recreation and industrial use; Class B waters protect habitat for fish and other aquatic life, and are suitable for recreation, navigation and agricultural/industrial use; Class C waters are considered suitable for navigation, industrial processes and cooling water supply.

Hope for reclassification of the Androscoggin’s Class C sections rests in part on a milestone achieved in 2022. The Maine Legislature, in a unanimous vote, reclassified a 14-mile stretch of the river from the Worumbo Dam in Lisbon Falls to Merrymeeting Bay, where the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers meet.

The decision was based on extensive data showing water quality in the river consistently met or exceeded Class B standards, particularly in terms of aquatic life support and dissolved oxygen levels.

The Friends of Merrymeeting Bay was one of the groups that pushed for decades for the 2022 classification. The group stressed the improved conditions of the river and the need for its classification to reflect these advancements.

The upgrade also emphasized Maine’s commitment to the anti-degradation policy, which ensures

that water bodies that meet higher standards are recognized and protected.

Two proposals submitted for DEP review urge lawmakers to extend the Class B designation upstream.

One from Grow L+A, a Lewiston-Auburn nonprofit, targets a 14-mile stretch of the Androscoggin River from the base of Gulf Island Pond, located about 4 miles north of Great Falls, to the Worumbo Dam in Lisbon Falls. A second proposal from the Androscoggin River Watershed Council would extend the B classification from the Worumbo Dam all the way to Ellis River near Rumford.

Both proposals cite long-term water-quality monitoring data showing these sections of the river exceed Class B standards and have for several years.

Peter Rubins, board member for Grow L+A, has been a steward of the river for 50 years. He said his own view of the Androscoggin has changed dramatically since the 1970s.

“It was a disgusting mess. It stank. It was covered with foam. The banks were slimy,” Rubins said.

Now, he sees “something that’s aesthetically pleasing, that’s alive, that’s full of birds, fish, paddlers, rowers, people fishing.”

“It’s an entirely different experience,” he said.