

SUPPORT

LD 72 – An Act to Open the St. Croix River to River Herring

Sponsor: Representative SOCTOMAH of the Passamaquoddy Tribe.

Co-Sponsors: Representatives AYOTTE of Caswell, BEAR of the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, BEAUDOIN of Biddeford, BERRY of Bowdoinham, DOAK of Columbia Falls, MITCHELL of the Penobscot Nation, PARRY of Arundel, and Senators DUTREMBLE of York and JACKSON of Aroostook

Summary: The bill directs the Department of Marine Resources and the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to require that fishways on the Woodland Dam and the Grand Falls Dam in the St. Croix River be operated to allow unconstrained passage of alewives (river herring) to upstream lakes to spawn.

Explanation: This bill would overturn a misguided 1995 law that blocks upstream passage for alewives in the St. Croix River. Passage of this bill will benefit the Passamaquoddy people, Maine’s commercial fishing industry, and fish and wildlife throughout the Gulf of Maine.

Alewives are sometimes referred to as “the Purina Chow of the sea”—serving as a critical food source for many valuable fish species, including salmon, striped bass, bluefish, cod, and haddock. In the 1980s, more than 2.6 million alewives traveled up the St. Croix River to native spawning habitat in upstream lakes, but the number of returning alewives collapsed to less than 1,000 fish after the legislature closed the Woodland and Grand Falls Dams to alewives in 1995.

Lawmakers took this misguided action in response to smallmouth bass fishing guides who believe that alewives might harm the smallmouth bass that live in the upstream lakes beyond the Grand Falls Dam. But there is no scientific evidence to support this claim. In fact, smallmouth bass and alewives coexist in lakes and waterways throughout Maine and the northeast coast of North America.

Opening up the St. Croix River for alewife passage could eventually produce an annual run of 20 million fish—which could provide huge benefits for ground fish in the Gulf of Maine. Maine scientists have linked the disappearance of coastal cod stocks to the dramatic decline in the number of alewives compared to historic levels. Alewives spend their lives at sea but swim up rivers to spawn in the spring. Large numbers of cod used to follow these fish close to shore where they could be caught more easily, supplying the Maine fishing industry with a lucrative catch.

In 2008, the Legislature debated the question of opening up the St. Croix River to alewife passage but failed to take the necessary action of requiring that both the Woodland and Grand Falls Dams be opened up. Instead, a law was passed directing only that the lower Woodland Dam be opened for alewives—which only provided access to about 2 percent of the historic spawning habitat for this species. The LePage Administration has announced that it will introduce a bill that would set an artificial limit on the number of alewives allowed to travel upstream beyond the Grand Falls Dam. NRCM opposes that approach which is not based on science. We strongly support passage of LD 72 for the benefit of the Passamaquoddy Indian Nation, Maine’s fish and wildlife, and our commercial fishing industry.

NRCM supports LD 72.