

Celebrating the 45th Anniversary of the Clean Water Act

Remarks by Lisa Pohlmann, NRCM Executive Director, October 17, 2017

We are here today along the banks of the Androscoggin River to celebrate the 45th Anniversary of the Clean Water Act—one of the nation’s most important environmental laws.

This landmark law was a crowning accomplishment for Maine Senator Edmund Muskie, who grew up in Rumford and ran for office in part because he wanted to stop our rivers from being treated as open sewers.

Before the Clean Water Act, Maine had no sewage treatment plants. The toxic fumes from our rivers caused paint to peel off buildings and boats, and made people ill from the odors. The stench depressed real estate values and left retail stores in Lewiston and other communities deserted in the summer months.

And when the weather was hot, the pollution killed just about all the fish and wildlife in the Androscoggin River, as well as in the Kennebec, Penobscot, and Presumpscot.

The Androscoggin was labeled the most polluted river in America and became the poster child of our polluted rivers. It wasn’t just our rivers that had become foul, unsafe, and devoid of life.

For example, in 1970, the City of Portland was still dumping the raw sewage of its 75,000 inhabitants directly into the ocean, without any treatment. This was the reality across the country, too.

Senator Muskie was the driving force that put our nation on a different path—a path that has brought life back to dead waterways, including the Androscoggin. He worked tirelessly on this issue, and NRCM was a partner in that work from 1965 until the bill became law in 1972.

While it seems impossible by today’s standards, in 1972 Senator Muskie secured a unanimous, bipartisan vote of 86 to 0 on the Clean Water Act in the U.S. Senate, followed by a vote of 380 to 14 in the House of Representatives. Both bodies voted to override a veto of the bill by President Nixon, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Muskie’s leadership as a champion for clean water has helped protect human health from pollution, enabled fish in large numbers to repopulate our rivers, and helped communities pursue economic development along rivers. This has been the case here in Lewiston and Auburn. Most importantly, the Clean Water Act has improved the quality of life for countless Americans nationwide. For that, we are enormously grateful.

But our work is far from being done. We are now seeing new threats to our nation’s clean water laws. The Trump Administration wants to radically cut funding for EPA programs that help protect water quality in Maine. The President and his allies in Congress are working to undermine the Clean Water Rule, and they are attacking programs that reduce air pollution from upwind sources that drop mercury into Maine’s waters, harming our wildlife and our citizens and visitors.

That’s why we’re calling on Maine Senators Susan Collins and Angus King to carry on the leadership pioneered by Senator Muskie. We urge them to defend the Clean Water Act and the nation’s waterways. Don’t allow these rollbacks, which undermine the progress we have achieved here and across the country since the Clean Water Act became law, 45 years ago.