

Presumpscot River News

Publication of the Friends of the Presumpscot River

Volume 13 Issue 1

January 2005

Making Ripples, Making Waves

A Retrospective: As we begin 2005, I am writing a newsletter that recaps our journey as an organization. It also records some of the changes we have gone through, not only for this year, but for the decade plus that Friends of the Presumpscot River (FOPR) has existed.

When FOPR started, only those few who lived along the upper river or fished some of its loveliest spots had any inkling what a treasure we had in our midst. The generally accepted perception of the Presumpscot was that it was polluted, mostly controlled by industry and not much was ever going to change. It made a convenient waste conduit and controlled the level of Sebago Lake, but beyond that it wasn't worth much effort.

Looking Back---the Early Years: In 1992 starting as a group of neighbors at a kitchen table, we formed FOPR to take on a threat to our neighborhood. This threat came from a large multinational corporation that proposed a paper de-inking plant for the banks of the Presumpscot with a significant industrial wastewater discharge to the river. We had no money, no experience and no formal training. We didn't know what lay ahead of us or how big the challenge was. But, we strongly believed we were right--therefore we forged ahead. From what could be called a shaky beginning, the improbable result was a resounding success.

While we were considered one of those NIMBY groups when we first got organized, we proved that we were different right from

the start. In a whirlwind campaign that lasted about six months, we defeated the industrial development.

Although we were fighting an uphill battle, a David and Goliath fight and we were greeted with less than joy by some, we saw glimmers of hope that we could change the negative perception of the Presumpscot. None of the nay saying (even from people who had spent their lives trying to improve rivers) could dissuade us from fighting this fight. While most groups like ours disband after the issue that brought them together is over, we vowed to stay together and work to bring this river back to life.



Saccarappa Falls—May 4, 2004

The Presumpscot's History: Back then, none of us knew about the illustrious history of this river or its former glory as one of the most prolific salmon rivers in the state or about the millions of migratory shad,

alewife and herring that once came up the Presumpscot to spawn. We didn't know it once had twelve named falls or that it was the food source of Native Americans and early settlers alike; that it provided food for the colonists when the harbor at Portland was blockaded by the British during the Revolutionary War or that the rock and cobble bottom still existed behind the dams and could be restored with dam removal. What we did know though, was that our instincts, our guts told us that we needed to save this river.

Membership: Hanging in There Through Thick and Thin: In the beginning our membership came mostly for locals, people who lived along the river or in the neighborhoods most affected by the industrial development. Today, we still have many of those members, but our love for the river and the need to protect it has expanded our membership into the Greater Portland community and beyond. After winning our fight with the de-inking plant, we started to concentrate on what else needed to be done. Through the legislative process, an arena that most of us had never worked in before, we reclassified two segments of the river, upgrading one section from class B to a more protective class A and adding language that prohibits new discharges to the B classification of another segment. We worked on gathering data with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection and we were watch dogs during the licensing of the treatment plants along the river.

To work on dioxin contamination in the Presumpscot, we joined a coalition of river advocates from across the state, lead by the staff at the Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM). During that struggle, it became apparent that there really was no statewide river group working solely on issues that impact Maine's rivers so FOPR board members began to talk with other

groups to establish one. Realizing that this was more than we could take on as a single group we talked with NRCM staff and a seed was planted. The result was the creation of *Maine Rivers* as a project of NRCM. Through their efforts and the efforts of many original members of the dioxin coalition (including FOPR), Maine Rivers became a very effective independent organization, concentrating on river issues and education.

Giant Leap of Faith: In 1996, the most fundamental, overwhelming, exciting and important decision ever to confront our group came upon us in the form of the relicensing of five consecutive middle-river dams owned by Sappi . The Board of Directors asked many questions. How should we react to this relicensing? Could we do this as an all volunteer organization? What are the pros and cons of dams? Could we participate in this confusing and complicated process, run by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) in Washington? Could we get the dam owners to do this in a collaborative manner? FOPR even organized a large meeting with the majority of stakeholders at the table asking Sappi to relicense the dams through the collaborative process, to no avail. Sappi wanted go the traditional way and we were off to the races, as they say.

Through careful evaluation and much soul-searching, we jumped in with both feet. The conclusion from all our deliberations was that with selective dam removals, we could restore a balance to the Presumpscot---a balance had been lacking for nearly 250 years. Dams cause water to pool behind them and change the character of rivers; they warm the water, change habitat for fish and block migration to historic spawning grounds. With careful analysis, we looked at how much electricity each dam produced.

Our vision was that the lowermost of 5 dams up for relicensing, Saccarappa, Mallison Falls and Little Falls dams should be removed, along with the installation of fish passage and flow improvements on Gambo and Dundee dams. The three smallest dams could be removed and still keep 75% of the power producing capacity of the river intact. And, with the removal of Smelt Hill dam at the head of tide in Falmouth, nearly 16 miles of river would be open to the ocean.

We wrote our own comments to FERC on everything from water quality to fisheries to neighborhood concerns, all this as complete volunteers, each one with a day job and little experience in this field. Yet, we had people who knew marketing, politics, science, the river itself through fishing, canoeing and swimming; and we had people who knew the neighborhoods around the river.

Our first grant opportunity came when we received money from the Davis Conservation Fund for a poster/map to tell the story of the river. Done solely with volunteers, our artist in residence, board member Mike Shaughnessey, cajoled and persuaded a graphic designer friend to help with the project.

It seemed that everywhere we looked, our enthusiasm and dedication brought help as we needed it. A picture truly is worth a thousand words and we needed tell a story. We also needed to show both the river's beauty and the way it has been altered by the dams. A Portland based video production company volunteered to help us make the video and arranged for us to piggyback a helicopter mounted video taping session on to one that was already scheduled to do work in the area. Out of that came our wonderful visual story of the Presumpscot at a fraction of what it normally would have cost.

Through networking with several other river and environmental groups, we finally began a partnership with a national group, American Rivers in 2000, when they listed the Presumpscot as one of the most endangered rivers in the United States due to the presence and operation of nine dams in merely 25 river miles. This partnership changed the character of our work and allowed us to bring in experts who could prove our assertions that the river is worth saving for coldwater and migratory fish species. At the beginning of the relicensing, no one called for fish passage or dam removal. State and federal agencies were ready to accept only minor improvements in water quality, which could not be changed for another *40-50 years*.



Presumpscot above Cumberland Mills Dam-
Rapids Revealed During Drawdown –May 2004

Dam Relicensing: With the expertise of our attorney, Ron Kreisman, we developed a strategy that would make FERC and the natural resource agencies listen to our voices. At the first public hearing, we turned out over one hundred people, almost all of them telling FERC that this river needed an involved Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), not just a quick Environmental Assessment (EA). People advocated for dam removal and fisheries restoration. FERC listened, especially since

the owner of the dams (SAPPI) was saying that the river is just fine, no improvements were needed and did the EIS.

FOPR wrote grants and hired experts to prove to the agencies and to FERC that under all the sediment, there really was rock and sand and gravel, not clay as asserted by SAPPI; we hired a fisheries expert who had worked on the Edwards dam removal to assess the Presumpscot populations and its potential because Sappi's experts had stated that the river was fine with a not-so-thriving population of bass and chub. The conclusion: *this was once a prolific Atlantic salmon river, with abundant populations of sea run fish (such as alewife, American shad, shortnose sturgeon, striped bass, brook trout. Rainbow smelt and other coldwater species) and most importantly, could be again with dam removal.*

We enlisted a volunteer from Friends of Sebago Lake to do historical research to show that these migratory fish did swim all the way up into the watershed before they were extirpated by dams. A former energy economist looked at the energy production of the dams and the needs of the mill and showed us that the energy produced by the three small dams only amounted to 1/10 of 1 % of all the energy produced in Maine. FERC's Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), which forms the basis for the licenses, did not call for dam removal but made several arguments why it was the best for the fishery and for habitat restoration.

In October of 2003, almost one year after the removal of the first dam on the river, Smelt Hill dam, FERC issued the final licenses for the five dams. These licenses require Sappi to install fish passage on all five dams, improve flows during warm summer months and provide passage for the American eel.

But they are *contingent* and *conditional* on passage at Cumberland Mills dam, now the first dam on the river. It's a small, non-hydropower dam, under the jurisdiction of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MEDIF&W). To achieve passage, a petition must be filed with the Commissioner of MEDIF&W. No other entity has stepped forward to seek this petition so it is clear that FOPR will be the organization to do the petition. But, we are waiting for a decision from the Maine Supreme Court before we seek passage at Cumberland Mills.



Presumpscot Falls-Revealed after Removal of Smelt Hill Dam, October 2002

Where We Are Today: The FERC licenses and the State of Maine water quality certificate, which mirrors the licenses and is required as part of the licenses, are being challenged in court. Sappi lost the first two challenges to the state certificate, one before the Maine Board of Environmental Protection and one in Maine Judicial Court. The appeal of that decision was heard before the Maine Supreme Court in November 2004, with a decision expected in January or February of 2005. The FERC licenses are also under challenge in federal court and are expected to be heard in April of 2005. We still are working towards dam removal. It is impossible to economically justify

putting fish passage on dams that are so small, old and inefficient. Yet, it is essential that fish are allowed to pass safely upstream and downstream and that these dams are brought into the 21st century. Our offer of a collaborative process is still open and we are ready to work with the dam owners to figure out a solution that will remove dams and help them meet their license obligations.

The Ripples and Waves: As a result of the events that have happened and are about to happen with dam removal, fish passage and water quality improvements, several other local projects have now taken place in the communities surrounding the Presumpscot. A farmer's field along the river, the proposed site for the de-inking plant is now a soccer field for Windham's kids. A beautiful trail that also borders the proposed industrial site was built along the river on a segment of an abandon railroad track linking Windham and Gorham and the old Oriental Powder Mill site.

The first dam in Maine and the first dam on the Presumpscot, Smelt Hill dam was removed in October 2002 through the efforts of the Coastal Conservation Association and the State of Maine. Because the lower parts of the river are now open to the ocean, larger numbers of striped bass, American shad, and alewife are now being seen. A cacophony of birds (eagles, osprey, cormorants, kingfishers and gulls) were heard last spring as these fish made their way up over the newly revealed Presumpscot Falls and seventh graders in Westbrook were able to release Atlantic salmon fry into Mill Brook, a tributary of the Presumpscot for the first time. Salmon have been absent from the Presumpscot for more than a century.

A local land trust, Portland Trails, has preserved nearly 100 acres on the lower river and developed a trail for public access near the old Smelt Hill site. Falmouth has purchased land and is developing carry-in

boat access in the lower river below the old dam site, as well. Local communities along the river such as Westbrook are turning back towards the river for their economic development. Westbrook has installed a boardwalk and new office buildings have been built or are planned for the riverside area of their downtown.

A management plan that will be used as a tool to protect the future of the river corridor was developed by local stakeholders, under the auspices of the Casco Bay Estuary Project; and now, a new coalition has formed to implement this plan, which includes recommendations for dam removal, open space preservation and the reduction of cumulative impacts on the Presumpscot. This group includes members from the municipalities in bordering towns, state agencies, FOPR and several other non-governmental organizations.

Friends of the Presumpscot River is involved in many of these undertaking in addition to working on the one event that will have the most impact--- the removal of three to four dams and the restoration of the river's historic fishery. We started with a ripple, protecting one small space close to our homes. Now, that momentum has produced waves and has taken us farther than anyone could possibly ever imagine when "Friends" began--- as neighbors cutting and pasting messages to create newsletters; painting and placing Save Our River signs throughout the community, and enlarging pictures of the beautiful parts of the Presumpscot to show legislators that we should protect the river by reclassifying it to Class A.

The Continuing Story: This is an incredible journey that we will carry on with. Stay tuned for more exciting and wave-making events. Being involved in this endeavor, the restoration of nearly an entire ecosystem is one of the most important things most of us

will ever do. It's a chance that doesn't come along more than once in a lifetime. FOPR and all our partners will persist and save this river, to make it a vibrant resource for wildlife and the people of our communities once again.

Thank you to all who have made it possible so far and to all those who will become supporters in the future.

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Cooler of Atlantic Salmon Fry-Released into Mill Brook a tributary of the Presumpscot- May 2004

INSTRUCTIONS:

Please complete this form and mail it with your check to: Friends of the Presumpscot River, PO Box 223, South Windham, ME 04082.

Membership Year to March 15, 2006

Dues: _____ \$5 (Students and Seniors)
 _____ \$ 10 (Individual)
 _____ \$ \$20 (Family)

Donations: *Yes, I want to help FOPR with river restoration work.*

Levels of giving:

- River Supporter.....\$35
- River Sustainer.....\$50
- River Steward..... \$100**
- River Guardian.....\$250
- River Conservationist.....\$500
- Other.....\$_____

Donations of any amount are greatly appreciated

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