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Multi-year Study Reveals Challenges for Maine Fish

Portland, ME—A consortium of local organizations and government agencies has completed a second summer collecting data on the condition of stream crossings and dams throughout the Casco Bay watershed. Originally designed to develop priorities for environmental restoration projects, the study has also bears on a controversy concerning the size of culverts that would be approved by state regulators.

The collaborative, multi-year study is examining dams and the places where roads cross streams throughout the Casco Bay watershed. So far, data has revealed that nearly a third of culverts and almost all dams in the lower Presumpscot and Royal River watersheds never allow fish to move up or down stream. In fact, less than four percent of culverts always allow fish movement.

Fish passage barriers prevent certain fish, like alewives and Atlantic salmon, from reaching spawning areas. Those fish have vanished from most of their historical habitat in the Casco Bay watershed, and the remaining populations are in decline, in part because of their limited access to freshwater habitat. Fish passage barriers can also harm the populations of fish like trout and landlocked salmon that do not go to sea. Such species must be able to migrate among freshwater habitats to complete their lifecycles.

Similar findings from elsewhere in Maine suggest that nearly all existing culverts in the state restrict fish migrations. "Most people don't give much thought to culverts and dams" says Curtis Bohlen, director of the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, which managed the study. "But there are a couple thousand of them scattered throughout the Casco Bay region, and their conditions have a substantial effect on fish populations and stream health."

Maine's Department of Environmental Protection is currently reviewing standards for new or replacement culverts that can be authorized under "Permit by Rule" rather than the more time-consuming individual permit process. Those expedited permits would be granted only to larger culverts because they are generally better for fish, reduce risk of failure during floods and improve stream health. They are also more expensive to construct.

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Some towns have expressed opposition to rules that could increase the cost of road infrastructure in a period of declining municipal budgets. The New England Environmental Finance Center, at USM's Muskie School of Public Service, is undertaking a study of the cost of the new rules.

A public meeting on the proposed rules will be held 9:00 a.m. to noon on Thursday, August 26 at the Maine Municipal Association Building in Augusta.

Last year, staff and volunteers from the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership, Trout Unlimited, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program's Gulf of Maine Office surveyed more than 700 sites in the lower Presumpscot River watershed and the adjacent Royal River watershed. Recently, those organizations were joined by the Portland Water District and the Sebago Anglers Association, and catalogued an additional 300 sites. Participants concentrated this year in the Crooked River watershed, which supports important recreational fisheries.

Experts with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's office in Falmouth are analyzing the data to determine which sites should be top restoration priorities. "With hundreds of potential fish passage barriers to fix, it is essential to figure out which ones are most important to repair, and also seek ways to work collaboratively with towns and other local partners." said Alex Abbot, a contractor with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"Trout Unlimited is expecting that the studies will show where improvements can be made to benefit fisheries habitat," said Steve Heinz of the Sebago Chapter of Trout Unlimited. "We hope to partner with towns on selected projects through TU's "Embrace-a-Stream" grant program."

The Casco Bay Estuary Partnership also has funding available to assist communities with improving fish passage at sites the study flags as a high priority for restoration. Outreach to local towns to identify potential collaborative projects has already begun.

Over the two summers, more than 25 volunteers have taken part in training programs and worked in the field. "The project would never have been possible without the commitment of volunteers. Not only is time in the field enjoyable, but as citizen scientists, participants become community advocates for the effort to rehabilitate fish passage in Maine," said Camilla Fecteau, 2010 survey coordinator.

The Casco Bay watershed study broke new ground by examining not only fish passage, but also flood risk and erosion issues. "We realized that the data we were collecting to evaluate fish passage also provides information on the capacity of culverts to convey flood waters. We have been able to use that information to flag culverts that should be more carefully evaluated to assess whether they may be vulnerable to floods." said Bohlen. "We believe that information will be valuable as towns allocate limited resources for infrastructure planning."

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