https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4JipBQSAx4&t=54s

Portland Press Herald Sunday June 30, 2024

Endangered Atlantic salmon population takes a hit after river dredged in Phillips

Phillips is being investigated by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection for damaging Atlantic salmon habitat along the South Branch of the Sandy River. PHILLIPS —

Despite dams blocking their path up the Kennebec River, a growing number of endangered Atlantic salmon have made their way to the cold-water habitat of the Sandy River to spawn each fall. Maine Department of Marine Resources estimates that 150 Atlantic salmon made it to the Sandy River and its tributaries this past October, nearly twice the number from the previous year.

But that habitat of braided channels in the South Branch of the Sandy River was destroyed following a December flood when town officials brought in excavators and other large equipment and dredged a large section of the river.

The South Branch of the Sandy River in Phillips, where endangered Atlantic salmon habitat was destroyed when heavy equipment was brought in after winter flooding.

Fisheries expert Daniel McCaw, who formerly studied the Atlantic salmon habitat in the Sandy River, estimates that thousands of salmon eggs and juveniles were destroyed due to the dredging that turned the branch with numerous channels into a “canal.”

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection is investigating the town for destroying the delicate habitat. Other organizations such as the Natural Resources Council of Maine is keeping a watchful eye on the outcome, Regional Outreach Coordinator Marc Edwards said.

According to McCaw, the fisheries program manager for the Penobscot Indian Nation, the south branch was made up of numerous threads of running water covered with trees, which provided shade for the cool waters that salmon prefer.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, female salmon can lay up to 7,500 eggs apiece.

A powerful December rainstorm caused power outages, flooding and road closures. Town officials brought in heavy machinery, McCaw said, to change the flow of the river.

“What I understand, and details are still sketchy, is that the town went in and, in order to alleviate this flooding, the town went in and removed the wooded debris,” McCaw said. “They then dredged up to 10 feet down in a central channel, drying up all the other side channels. They did that for a mile of river, maybe a little more. They dredged, shutting off these other channels, removing anything from the middle of the stream, and basically creating a canal type of environment, where the river is now a single threaded channel and drying up all the side channels.”

“I’m guessing it took multiple large excavators, bulldozers, dump trucks and very big equipment,” McCaw added. “Also, the town had to construct roads and access points, and the areas along the side of the river had to become part of a road of rubble and rocks to get these vehicles and machine in there.”

A local citizen filed a complaint with the state, McCaw said.
Town Manager Maureen Haley has not returned several phone calls and messages seeking comment. Selectman Janet White also did not return a message seeking information. The other selectmen could not be reached.

The Maine DEP confirmed it is conducting an investigation.
“DEP is aware of the issues related to the South Branch of the Sandy River. In order to evaluate impacts, department staff conducted a site visit and communicated with local and state representatives. The department’s investigation is ongoing,” Deputy Commissioner David Madore, the director of communications, said in a statement.

Madore refused to elaborate on what penalties or mitigation efforts Phillips might be required to do to fix the situation. Penalties could include fines and forcing the town to restore the habitat back to its numerous channels, McCaw said.

“Not only are you destroying habitat without a federal permit, you’re also killing Atlantic salmon in developing eggs,” McCaw said. “In these little stretches of streams that were in that area – this beautiful complex of habitat – there were juvenile salmon 1-year-old, 2-year-old juvenile salmon all through there, probably in the thousands. Those were either killed, harassed, pursued. Certainly, their homes were ripped apart or dried up. Not only was the habitat destroyed but multiple, multiple, many thousands of salmon were killed in this effort.”

The life span of the Atlantic salmon includes time spent in fresh water and salt water. Spawning adults lay thousands of salmon eggs in the gravel in nests, called redds. About 20% of the eggs will hatch in the spring and the juveniles will spend a couple of years in cold waters before returning to the ocean and swimming to the waters of Greenland, where they spend two years maturing into an adult. The fish can grow up to 28-30 inches in length and weigh 8-12 pounds. Atlantic salmon then begin their treacherous journey back to their spawning grounds. To reach the tributaries of the Sandy River, they migrate back up the Kennebec River. To get them past the dams, the fish are trapped and then trucked past the final dam.

“Last fall, the state of Maine Department of Marine Resources found that salmon had spawned in there and laid their eggs in multiple places through that area,” McCaw said.

The results show small and steady success. The South Branch of the Sandy River was designated as central habitat for the endangered Atlantic salmon, McCaw said, but it remains unknown how the salmon will react when they reach the waters in Phillips this fall if the single channel remains.

A view Thursday of the South Branch of the Sandy River in Phillips, where endangered Atlantic salmon habitat was destroyed when excavators and heavy equipment were brought in after December’s flooding. Dredged to make a canal, according to officials, the waterway was once made up of multiple thin channels of water, shaded by trees, making it ideal salmon habitat. “Not only was the habitat diminished in size, it was greatly diminished in quality,” he said. “The trees and things like that that normally shade those areas are gone, which leads to a heating up of the water, which is really hard on the salmon.”

A colleague told McCaw about the incident. He was dismayed by the photos of the damage created by the excavators and large machines that were sent to him.

McCaw said the town should have first contacted the Maine DEP and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service seeking assistance and permits. With past culvert work, the town had to know that endangered Atlantic salmon were in its local waters, McCaw said. The town should also have contacted the Army Corps of Engineers for guidance on changing the flow of the river.

“They were likely acting with a sense of urgency and probably didn’t do their due diligence,” McCaw said. “We try to do the right thing, but sometimes we miss the mark.