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New wild salmon rules to affect Sheepscot River

BY BOB KALISH

WISCASSET — Spawning Atlantic salmon in the Sheepscot River can breathe a bit easier now in light of a recent settlement agreement that will require federal wildlife agencies to protect critical habitat for the endangered wild Atlantic salmon in the Gulf of Maine.

The agreement is the result of a lawsuit filed by the Conservation Law Foundation, which is based in Brunswick, and the Center for Biological Diversity in Vermont. The agreement goes into effect next year on a total of eight rivers, including the Sheepscot.

“This will provide another layer of oversight,” said Sean Mahoney of the Conservation Law Foundation. “If, for example, the Army Corps of Engineers needs to dredge the Sheepscot or any of the rivers where salmon spawn, with this agreement they’ll have to get the OK from the federal Fish and Wildlife Agency before proceeding.”

Wild Atlantic salmon in Maine were listed as endangered species under the Endangered Species Act in 2000. Atlantic salmon that spawn in the Gulf of Maine represent the last wild remnant population of U.S. Atlantic salmon. In addition to the Sheepscot, other rivers known to support salmon are the Dennys,

East Machias, Machias, Pleasant, Narraguagus, Ducktrap and Cove Brook.

“With wild Atlantic salmon remaining in only eight rivers in Maine, and only around 100 adult fish returning to those rivers each year, protection of critical habitat is essential for recovering Maine’s salmon runs,” said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The critical habitat designation will ensure that the clean, unspoiled river habitat needed by Atlantic salmon is protected.”

The matter went before the court because in December 2005 the National Marine Fisheries and the federal Fish and Wildlife Service published a recovery plan for wild Atlantic salmon but did not designate critical habitat.

“The fact that the federal government hadn’t designated critical habitat for the struggling Atlantic salmon was a glaring failure to fulfill its obligations under the Endangered Species Act,” said Mahoney. “This settlement will lay the foundation for restoration of this critical species.”

Sebastian Belle, executive director of the Maine Aquaculture Association, said the effect on rivers would depend on how federal agencies designate critical habitat.

“It raises questions about what people who live on the Sheepscot can do,” he said. “For example, it could affect agriculture if it is shown that your fields are releasing chemicals into the designated habitat.”

Michael Herz, board member of the Sheepscot Valley Conservation Association, said the judge’s ruling was “obviously the right decision.”

“The question for the feds is what took so long?” he said, referring to the recent agreement. “I’m hopeful it will result in added protection for wild salmon habitat.”

But a bigger issue facing the Sheepscot is the proposed Twin River Energy Center coal gasification plant near the former Maine Yankee site in Wiscasset. Plans for the plant call for deliveries of coal from barges and rail cars to the site, using existing rail lines and the Back and Sheepscot rivers.

Herz’s worry over the proposed plant stems from the number of coal barges on the Sheepscot River and the scale of the project.

“This plant is the largest development ever on the Sheepscot,” he said. “Far and away, having two or three barges a day come up the river is very worrying. What effect it will have on salmon habitat we don’t know.”