

# Kennebec Salmon Focus of Federal Suit

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Two conservation organizations and a Maine resident have filed suit to force the federal government to strengthen protections for Atlantic salmon in the Kennebec River.

If successful, the suit could have implications for populations of sea-run salmon in the Penobscot River as well.

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, the Vermont-based Center for Biological Diversity and Augusta resident Douglas Watts want federal agencies to take action on a 2005 petition calling for the Kennebec's salmon population to be listed as an endangered species.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are reviewing whether to protect salmon populations in the Kennebec, Penobscot and Androscoggin rivers under the Endangered Species Act. Salmon populations in eight smaller rivers or streams already are listed as endangered species.

But the groups filed suit in U.S. District Court in Maine on Monday alleging that the agencies are moving too slowly on the Kennebec petition.

Watts said in an interview that he only had time to prepare a detailed report for the Kennebec when he wrote the original petition in 2005, which is the precursor to the current lawsuit. But he hopes the lawsuit will force the federal government's hand on the Penobscot as well.

"If they make a decision on the Kennebec, they are going to have to make a decision on the Penobscot at the same time," Watts said.

Once abundant in New England rivers, Atlantic salmon are now virtually extinct throughout their former range in the United States. Only the Penobscot boasts a sizable annual run of spawning salmon, and the vast majority of those fish can be traced to two federal salmon hatcheries in Maine.

Just 16 salmon were counted returning to spawn on the Kennebec last year. The return on the Penobscot, by comparison, was more than 900.

Representatives from the federal agencies could not be reached for comment late Monday.

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