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Senator Brad Farrin

It is Time to Prepare For Life Without the SAPPI Mill

(SKOWHEGAN, ME) – It is time to consider how best to cope with the devastating economic loss to our region that lies ahead with the closing of the SAPPI mill.

Governor Mills has clearly signaled her intention to force the closure of the Skowhegan mill and destroy the jobs of more than 750 millworkers, bringing an end to decades of SAPPI’s positive contributions to the people and families of the Skowhegan region and the greater Kennebec River Valley.

The closure of the mill will be the result of the Governor's insistence that the Shawmut Dam on the Kennebec River be removed so that 99% of the Atlantic salmon that use the river to reach spawning grounds can pass upstream rather than just 96% of them. Since official counts have shown the average return of Atlantic salmon to the Kennebec is about 44 fish, the difference between 96% and 99% of that number is less than two fish.

Despite the fact that Brookfield Renewable, owners of the dam, are spending more than $40 million to build state-of-the-art fish passage facilities across its four lower Kennebec dams, including a fish lift at Shawmut designed to pass at least 96% of Atlantic Salmon, and that have proven enormously successful at the similar Milford dam on the Penobscot River just 50 miles westward, the Mills administration has set an unachievable goal of 99%, knowing full well no dam in the nation has ever met this standard.

Never mind that the number of Atlantic salmon counted at Milford last year was more than double what it was before the new fish lift became fully operational. The Governor says Shawmut must go.

After Mills’ Department of Marine Resources (DMR) failed to force the removal of at least two dams on the river through an illegal rulemaking last spring, she turned to her Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) which recently issued a draft denial of a “water quality certification” for Shawmut.

The average person understands that water quality involves certain things like “parts per million” of contaminates in water samples. In its denial, DEP acknowledged that the water in the Kennebec meets state standards for quality, but it denied the certification anyway based on the number of salmon passing upstream using DMR’s unreachable standard.

After receiving the draft denial of the Shawmut Dam’s water quality certification for continued operations, Brookfield Renewable filed to withdraw its application, with the stated intent of re-filing a new application with updated information.

However, much uncertainty remains for the fate of the dam and, in turn, the SAPPI mill. A removal of the Shawmut Dam would mean the end of SAPPI, whose owners have told federal regulators that water levels would drop below those needed to continue operations. With Governor Mills determined to ensure the dam’s removal, it is time to take action to avoid the devastating economic loss to our region that lies ahead if she is successful. Otherwise, it will soon be time to consider how best to cope with this loss.

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