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Bristol Mills Dam Advisory Committee Begins to Discuss Site Concepts

Bristol, Maine – May 27, 2017 – The Bristol Mills Dam Advisory Committee met with Wright-Pierce Engineering on May 23 to discuss concepts that the engineering firm will develop for the feasibility study underway since December 2016. The dam, which was built in 1914, needs repairs and lacks adequate fish passage for alewives and other native fish species in the Pemaquid River. Each of the concepts is anticipated to provide enhanced fish passage and maintain or enhance firefighting water supplies, upstream water level control, and recreational opportunities like swimming.

The concepts under consideration are 1) repair and modify the dam to meet community safety needs and replace the old fishway with a new, improved one, 2) partial replacement of the dam with control of water levels and fish passage performed by “nature-like” rock structures, and 3) full dam replacement with nature-like water control and fish passage. Wright-Pierce presented examples of nature-like structures, such as Sennebec Lake, Patten Stream in Surry, and East Branch Lake in the Penobscot watershed, that provide very low maintenance approaches to water level control and fish passage, while blending into the stream environment in both appearance and function.

After the feasibility study, the Committee will provide the Town of Bristol Board of Selectmen with the study results, which will include a summary of each concept’s costs and benefits. Each concept will include initial construction costs and future maintenance and operation costs.

During the past few months, the study has gained important information that will inform the concepts considered. A key finding has been that natural ledge features in the river channel between the dam and Benner road perform much of the upstream water level control.

The feasibility study has its roots in previous assessments of the fishway at Bristol Mills, which identified major deficiencies in its performance and led the Town and other project partners to design an improved “Denil” style fishway in 2015 after two years of work. The Denil was chosen based on its ability to support alewife population growth, moderate maintenance and operation requirements, good performance under a wide range of flows, and moderate cost, which would allow rapid fundraising and completion of the project. Speed of project completion was judged a critical factor by the Town due to the unsustainable condition of the run, which survived largely because a few volunteers helped the fish through the ailing fishway each year.

Full recovery of the Pemaquid Watershed alewife run above Bristol Mills Dam is over 600,000 adult fish. Replacement of the old fishway would first result in a single Denil. When growth of run begins to exceed capacity of the new fishway, it would be paired with a second Denil. Conservative projections by the US Fish and Wildlife Service estimate that the paired Denil fishway would help the run increase to somewhere over 400,000 adults before crowding would interfere with population growth. Nature-like concepts for fish passage and water level control under consideration by the feasibility study would be designed to support the alewife run’s growth to full recovery of over 600,000 adults.

Upcoming meetings of the Bristol Mills Dam Advisory Committee will include discussions about potential improvements and considerations for firefighting water supply (June 13). The Committee meets the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of every month from 6-8pm at the Bristol Town Office. All meetings are open to the public and all Committee materials, including supplementary reports and background information, are available at the Town Office. We hope to share this process with as many town residents and interested people as possible. Please join us to learn more about this valuable resource. The Dam Committee welcomes Public Comments.