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A Plan for the Future of the Presumpscot River: A Vision for the Future, Findings and Recommendations

Presumpscot River Management Plan Steering Committee

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A Vision for the Future: Findings and Recommendations

Findings

The future of the Presumpscot River is full of possibility:

Fisheries: Events of the recent past position the river for an unprecedented recovery. Water pollution on the river has been greatly abated with the development of water treatment facilities and SAPPI's elimination of its pulp mill. The removal of the Smelt Hill Dam, at head-of-tide has provided migratory fish species unimpeded access to the lower seven miles of Presumpscot River for the first time in over a century. Migratory fish, either remnant populations from the Presumpscot or strays from other river systems, can now recolonize the lower river. With full recolonization, the river as far as Cumberland Mills Dam in Westbrook (including access to habitat in the Piscataqua River and Mill Brook) could support runs of approximately 13,000 shad, 78,000 blueback herring, 20 to 100 Atlantic salmon, and 150,000 to 200,000 alewives. State and federal agencies have changed how they view the future of the river, and are now calling for restoration of migratory fishes to more of the river, above the Cumberland Mills Dam in Westbrook.

Open Space: Because most of the area along the Presumpscot River remains undeveloped, there are extensive opportunities to protect the area's open space values, to improve public access, to provide trails either to or along the river and to provide a variety of other recreation facilities and opportunities. The time to seize this opportunity may be limited, however, as development pressures are increasing. In the past, development along the river below Westbrook has been slowed by the negative environmental side effects of the pulp mill in Westbrook and the availability of more attractive waterfront property in the region.

Today, the mill's pulp operations have been eliminated, and so too have its attendant by-products of water pollution, and offensive downwind odors. Partly as a result of this change, the potential for development along the Presumpscot River has never been higher.

Cumulative Impacts: The Presumpscot has a rich history. The power and water supply provided by the Presumpscot were fundamentally important to the early development of the area, and the rise of an industrial economy along the river. The Presumpscot River was the site of Maine's first pulp mill, first hydroelectric project, only significant canal, and largest gunpowder mill. The river and its management continue to impact the region's economy; dams on the river are still a low cost producer of electricity and contribute economically to the SAPPI paper mill in Westbrook, which uses the power. Development of dams on the river had its costs however. A case in point is that migratory fishes were eliminated from the river – the Presumpscot was the site of one of the first serious disputes over water rights in Maine (fish versus dams). The dams also eliminated trout and salmon habitat and opportunities to fish for these species. Later, industrialization of the river reduced water quality and degraded the aesthetics of the river, reducing its attractiveness for boating, swimming, and other forms of recreation. All of these impacts have had economic impacts, as well as impacts on the quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors.

The challenge, and at the same time the opportunity before the Steering Committee, is to find solutions to problems which reduce cumulative impacts, improve the quality of life for residents and visitors, and contribute to a vibrant local economy that supports new and traditional industries.

A Vision for the Presumpscot River

The Presumpscot River, including its tributaries and shorelands, is managed to realize the greatest good for all its communities, both human and ecological, through a careful balancing of all potential uses. The river supports the production of renewable energy, and the full range of natural and economic benefits and uses that are dependent upon a restored and ecologically healthy river, including the benefits to resident and migratory fish and wildlife, and the use and enjoyment of the river for open space and recreation.

In pursuing this vision, the participants in this planning effort recognize two important and inescapable conclusions:

- 1) balancing and optimizing among potentially competing uses, values and interests is complex and requires considered judgments on how to integrate uses to achieve the greatest overall benefits;
- 2) the optimum mix of uses and management of the river will change over time as our knowledge and society's needs change.

Thus, the planning effort should not be viewed as "finished" at any point in time. Rather, to be effective, it will require a periodic reexamination of the issues involved in management of the river. In fact, this shift in our understanding of appropriate management, and the changing needs of our society over the last two centuries is what has prompted renewed interest in the Presumpscot, and a reexamination of its management.

Recommended Management Objectives

- Restoring, preserving, or enhancing riverine (free-flowing) habitat from Gambo Dam to Casco Bay.
- Restoring self-sustaining populations of native resident fish, and sea-run fisheries.
- Providing access to the entire river (as far as the dam at Sebago lake) for sea-run migratory fish, consistent with the management recommendations stated in the Draft "Fishery Management Plan for the Presumpscot River" prepared by the Maine Department of Marine Resources, Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife Department, and Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission (December 2001).
- Encourage operation of hydroelectric projects at Gambo, Dundee, Great Falls, and Eel Weir for maximum production of electricity and minimum impact on local ecosystems.
- Assuring the Presumpscot's waters are clean and are ranked at their highest practicable classification and are attaining these standards.
- Striving to reduce or eliminate existing point-source and nonpoint source discharges into the Presumpscot River and its tributaries.
- Minimizing the impact of nonpoint source pollution on the river.
- Protecting meaningful areas of open space along the Presumpscot River and its tributaries to preserve or improve wildlife habitat and provide healthy riparian buffers.
- Providing for additional public access and low-impact recreation along the river and its tributaries while preserving some lands for wildlife only.
- Promoting the economic, community and ecological benefits of a healthy river system.

Recommended Actions

The following is a summary of recommended actions developed by the Steering Committee with input received at public meetings. Appendix A includes a more complete listing and detailed treatment of the Plan's Recommendations, describing the need, cost, and implementation strategy for each recommendation. Appendix B is a record of comments received on the Draft Plan, and the Steering Committee's response to those comments.

These recommended actions are ranked in relative importance (High, Moderate, Low), reflecting the priorities of the Steering Committee, informed by rankings by participants at the May 7, 2003 public meeting. Attendees registered their priorities on a master list of recommended actions. The Steering Committee found that the participants in this exercise substantially confirmed their own sense of priorities. The results are presented below.

Establish a Presumpscot River Council

Establish a Presumpscot River Council to provide the framework and the resources needed to effectively implement the plan. The Council would provide an organized effort to secure funding and to coordinate resources needed to carry out the recommendations in this Plan. It would also serve to provide an ongoing mechanism and capability for addressing issues arising in the future that may affect the River. The Casco Bay Estuary Project should convene a task force, including members of the Presumpscot River Management Plan Steering Committee, to consider options for how the Council might be structured and organized, and to take whatever steps are needed to establish the Council.

(Top Priority – High Importance)

Restore Fisheries

Support efforts to achieve restoration of fish passage to the river above Cumberland Mills Dam. The preferred option is through removal of three small dams below Gambo Dam, and installation of up to three fish passage facilities as needed to accomplish full access when sea-run fish migrations reach population levels determined to warrant additional passage (**High** -- supported by 91%

of the participants at the May 2003 public meeting).

Protect Open Space

- Conserve open space parcels with a focus on high value areas (**High**).
- Educate landowners and other watershed residents about the benefits of conserving and enhancing riparian lands along the Presumpscot River and its tributaries (**High**).
- Encourage permanent dedication to open space for areas which are already publicly owned but not so dedicated (**Moderate**).
- Encourage expansion of local Resource Protection Districts to include the entire floodplain as it is being remapped by the U.S. Geological Survey (**Moderate**).

Enhance Recreation

- Develop a water trail the length of the river (**High**).
- Create new access points to the river where needed and appropriate (**High**).
- Develop a land trail along the river as feasible (**Moderate**).
- Renovate portions of the Cumberland and Oxford Canal as historic/recreational resources (**Low**).
- Assist with improvements to Riverton Trolley Park (**Low**).

Protect and Improve Water Quality

- Support comprehensive stormwater management efforts (**High**).
- Reclassify the river to Class B from Saccarappa Falls to tidewater (**Moderate/High**).
- Extend Casco Bay Estuary Project's Toxic Monitoring Program to include more sites at the mouth of the Presumpscot River (**Moderate**).
- Identify potential inadequate treatment of point sources of pollution where they exist (**Moderate**).

Control Nonpoint Source Pollution

- Support the CCSWCD's Erosion Control Training for Communities (*High*).
- Implement nonpoint education for municipal officials (*High*).
- Identify and remediate nonpoint sources of pollution (*Moderate/High*).
- Support erosion control technical assistance for landowners (*Moderate*).



Improve River Corridor Habitat Improvement

- Protect and enhance the riparian corridor by re-establishing forested buffers and siting development appropriately (*High*).
- Protect significant wetlands through purchasing, restoration efforts, and protective buffer projects (*Moderate*).
- Continue efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Gulf of Maine Program and the State of Maine to provide information to communities in the Presumpscot River Watershed and work with the communities and land trusts to develop protected wildlife corridors (*Moderate*).
- Encourage local citizens to perform stream habitat walks within the tributaries of the Presumpscot River (*Moderate*).

Support Stewardship/Public Education

- Support natural resources education for schools (*High*).
- Educate property owners of negative effects of pesticides (*High*).
- Inform public of Fish Advisories (*Moderate*).

Ensure Adequate Flood Protection

- Develop a flood mitigation program for the Presumpscot River Watershed (*Low/Moderate*).

Casco Bay Estuary Project

Reflecting the Views of
Presumpscot River Management Plan Steering Committee

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