

'It's one of those keystone species'

BY KEITH EDWARDS

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A SAMPLE: Maine Department of Marine Resources employees Jason Valliere, left, and Mark Pasterczyk drag a seine net Friday through the Kennebec River in Hallowell while collecting samples of juvenile fish. The agency monitors the river's habitat for striped bass and herring that breed in the river.

AUGUSTA -- Alewives, the small fish feasted upon by a massive variety of other animals and a key link in the food chain, could be swimming in Togus Pond as soon as next summer.

This summer members of the Worumontogus Pond Association, made up of property owners around Togus Pond, voted to ask the state Department of Marine Resources to start the reintroduction of alewives into the pond. There were no opposing votes.

The native fish, which are born in fresh water but spend most of their lives at sea before returning inland to spawn, are prevented from getting into Togus Pond by a dam the pond association owns on Togus Stream. Togus Stream empties into the Kennebec River which, in turn, flows to the sea.

Patten Williams, president of the pond association, noted alewives were in Togus Pond before people.

Nate Gray, a scientist with the Department of Marine Resources, said alewives could benefit the pond and are a species of huge importance to the ecosystem and a food source for a massive number of other animals.

The fish's return to native spawning grounds has been blocked on numerous waterways by dams.

"It's one of those keystone species, the middle man which converts plankton into something the bigger fish can eat," Gray said. "You can't say enough about that, the number of species an alewife could impact in its life is amazing. From the smallest right up to whales, this is one of those creatures so many species rely on. Their whole job is to be eaten. Bald eagles, kingfishers, otters, seals, hake, everybody eats the things. Oh my God, the list doesn't stop. That's why they are so important. We're 200 years late getting this work done. We need to plug this stuff back in, so much relies on it."

It could also be good for the pond itself, by reducing phosphorus levels. High phosphorus levels can turn a body of water green with algae, reducing property values.

Alewives eat plankton, which contribute to the creation of phosphorus. Thus, when the alewives go out to sea, where they spend most of their adult lives, they take phosphorus with them, reducing levels in the ponds they leave behind.

Alewives are also harvested commercially, primarily for lobster bait.

"Part of the deal is these creatures sequester phosphorus in their bodies and, when they go to the ocean, they take the phosphorus with them," Williams said. "This is one of those happy

intersections where water quality can be improved, the fishery for sport fish can be improved, and it's great for the Maine economy. It's a fascinating story."

Reintroduction could start in the spring by stocking adult alewives in the pond. The adult fish would spawn in Togus Pond and head out to the ocean. The juvenile fish born in the pond would likely head out to sea in September or October, Gray said, and, in four years they come back to spawn.

That would give officials four years to create some sort of passage for fish to get beyond the lone dam between the pond and stream, so the fish could return to Togus Pond.

Gray said a fishway would likely cost between \$200,000 and \$300,000. He said they'll seek state, federal, and private funding and is confident they could come up with a grant package to pay for installation.

A similar effort helped reintroduce alewives to Webber Pond in Vassalboro.

"This stuff can be done, should be done, has to be done," Gray said. "We'll get the money, through our funding partners. We'll go begging with our hat in our hands. We will get the money. We're pretty good at it."

If the alewife population returns strong enough, the fish could be commercially harvested from Togus Pond.

The Worumontogus Pond Association and the city of Augusta recently signed an agreement by which the city would serve as the fiscal agent and oversee receipts from the commercial harvest of alewives from the pond. The association and the city would split any revenue equally.

Patten, in a letter to City Manager William Bridgeo, said the Webber Pond Association has a similar relationship with the town of Vassalboro and they are currently gaining about \$16,000 annually from the fish harvest, which is split between the two parties.

Patten said the association would use its share of revenue to maintain the dam and make grants to help property owners on the pond pay for projects to prevent pollution from getting into the pond.

"The association and, perhaps, the city, would have additional money to make improvements to keep the improvements in water quality of the pond going," Mayor Roger Katz said before councilors voted earlier this month in favor of the harvesting rights agreement.

Gray said officials would watch the proposed fishway closely, to make sure undesirable species don't use it to gain access to Togus Pond.

Gray looks at the little fish and sees a bigger picture about taking care of our natural resources after hundreds of years of abuse.

"In the end, it comes back to us," he said. "Those are the things that make the world go round. It's not money that makes the world go round. It's not Silicon Valley. It's natural resources. And the realistic approach to this is one pond at a time, because that's how it fell apart."

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