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SECTION 5

Spring salmon fishing to resume on Penobscot

A state panel feels the fish have recovered enough to allow the limited season, but not everyone agrees.

By DEIRDRE FLEMING
Staff Writer

HALLOWELL — For the first time in almost a decade, fishermen will be allowed to cast for Atlantic salmon on the Penobscot River in the spring. The Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission voted unanimously Thursday to open the river to fly fishing for a limited season this May, despite protests from the

federal government and even some anglers.

"I wouldn't support any fishing for Atlantic salmon right now, given the fragile nature of the resources," said John Banks, director of natural resources for the Penobscot Indian Nation. "That's a personal position."

The tribe would not take a position on the debate, Banks said, because it decided the "science wasn't there" to make a decision either way.

Banks said he personally felt the river should remain closed. "But Lou Horvath of Holden, chairman of the Penobscot

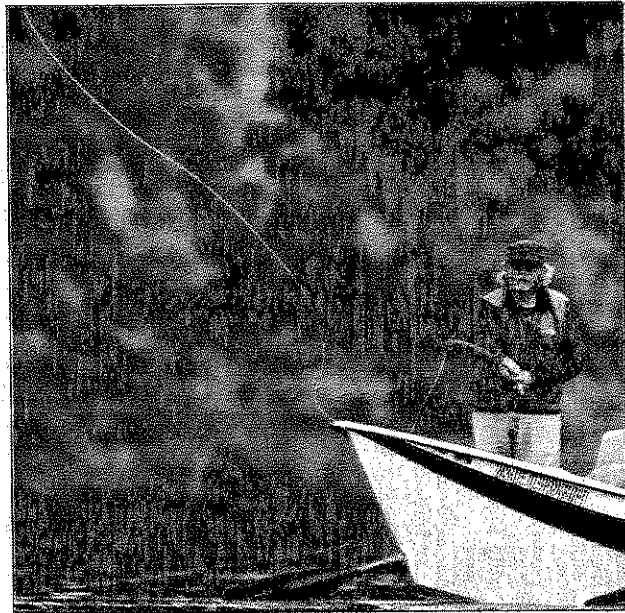
Salmon Club, was delighted. On May 3, the club will hold a breakfast with canoe rides and fishing displays for the public, he said.

In 1999, Maine rivers, including the Penobscot, were closed to Atlantic salmon fishing to protect the salmon population, which was believed to be threatened.

In the past two years, the commission opened the Penobscot to fly fishermen for limited fall seasons.

Few salmon were caught in the river — just one was reported in

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Fall fishermen had little luck in the last two years during limited Atlantic salmon fishing seasons on the Penobscot River, but the fish are more prevalent in the spring.

SALMON

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2006 and two were reported in 2007 — but that was expected at that time of year.

In contrast, Atlantic salmon race upriver on spawning runs in the spring.

Interest among fly fishermen was low in the fall seasons.

In 2006, 241 fishermen bought the special salmon licenses; the number fell to about 50 last fall.

While more salmon are expected in the river for the May season, the commission's ruling allows fishermen to catch and release only 50 Atlantic salmon.

The fishermen will be required to report catches immediately.

After the limit is reached, the season will end.

Anglers who fail to report their catches could lose their licenses.

Still, some fishermen feel the restrictions are inadequate.

Greg Ponte of West Gardiner stormed out of the Department of Marine Resources conference room after the decision. Outside, he said he was surprised.

Ponte echoed his testimony from a hearing on Jan. 24, at which he said the return of Atlantic salmon in the spring — just 916 in 2007 — was far below the 7,000 recommended as a benchmark by the U.S. Atlantic Salmon Assessment Committee.

In 2006, Atlantic salmon were listed as endangered in eight Maine rivers and streams. The Penobscot may be added to that list soon by the federal government.

In a letter dated Feb. 1, Patricia Kurkul of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration urged the commission to reconsider authorizing a spring Atlantic salmon season on the Penobscot River.

Kurkul wrote that a spring season is "inconsistent with several mutually agreed to goals" for the salmon restoration program, including the goal of increasing brood stock from returning salmon.

However, Maine Marine Resources Commissioner George Lapointe said that even if the Penobscot is added to the list of waters where Atlantic salmon are endangered, a spring season may be possible because the salmon commission has a better working relationship with the federal agencies than it did in the past.

"This is not us throwing one last bone to the fishermen," Lapointe said.

Staff Writer Deirdre Fleming can be contacted at 791-6452 or at dfleming@pressherald.com