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## Brunswick group wants to help fish navigate the Androscoggin, but there's a dam in the way

With federal relicensing approaching, a citizen-led group is weighing in on whether to redesign the fish ladder or possibly remove the dam altogether.

Communities:

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[Katie Langley](#) Staff Writer

The dam on the Androscoggin River between Brunswick and Topsham is up for federal relicensing in 2029. (Courtesy of Free the Andro)

3 min read

A group of Brunswick-area residents wants to make it easier for fish to get up the Androscoggin River, but there's a dam in the way.

Federal regulators and dam owners are about a year into the five-year process of relicensing the 50-year-old hydroelectric dam that spans the Androscoggin River between Brunswick and Topsham. Local environmentalists say it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to evaluate and redesign passageways that have failed to allow fish migration.

At a packed public launch meeting at Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick Tuesday night, the newly formed nonprofit Free the Andro discussed options for the future of the dam and encouraged community members to be "a voice for the fish."

"The Androscoggin River (is) a very valuable asset in our communities," said Chip Spies, the founder of Free the Andro. "It was the poster child for the Clean Water Act back in the '70s with Ed Muskie, and since that time, it has been cleaned up tremendously."

The next step in restoring the health of the river should be making sure fish are reaching their historic breeding grounds, Spies said. But most fish are not getting through, [according to counts conducted by the Maine Department of Marine Resources](#).

For example, the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2020](#) found that the lower Androscoggin could support 84,000 American shad. In 2024, only 91 shad were recorded in the fishway. In 2023, it was just 14 shad.

“(Fish are) trying, but they’re not getting above the dam,” Spies said.



The current vertical slot fish ladder system at the Brunswick-Topsham dam is described as ineffective by environmental advocates. (Courtesy of Free the Andro)

The dam has been operated by Brookfield Renewable Energy since 2013. It contributes about 90,000 megawatt hours of hydroelectric power to the Central Maine Power grid annually. That’s enough to power about 13,000 homes. Brookfield’s license expires in 2029. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission will have to determine whether to renew the license for another 50 years and what the conditions of that license should be.

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Environmental advocates are exploring several options for fish passage, including a type of ladder called a bypass fishway and a mechanical fish lift. The cheapest, most effective and likely most contentious option, they say, would be removing the dam.

Spies pointed to the [removal of the Edwards dam](#) on the Kennebec river in 1999, which cleared the way for the rebound of migratory fish populations.

A Brookfield spokesperson said the relicensing process would take years of studies and work with federal and state agencies, which would include opportunities for public feedback.

“We consider the results of our studies, including those focused on fish passage, and the input of all stakeholders before preparing and submitting a final license application to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission,” Brookfield said in an email. “We are working on studies as part of the relicensing of the Project that will review measures to modify or replace the existing fish passage. We met with resource agencies and stakeholders on Jan. 27 to review downstream fish passage alternatives, and we will do the same for upstream passage alternatives in the coming months.”

The town governments of both [Brunswick](#) and Topsham passed resolutions last year supporting improvements to migratory fish passage as part of the FERC licensing process.

Free the Andro formed last year and has been supported by the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, the Merrymeeting Bay chapter of Trout Unlimited, American Rivers and other environmental nonprofit groups.

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### **Katie Langley Staff Writer**

Katie covers Brunswick and Topsham for the Times Record. She was previously the weekend reporter at the Portland Press Herald and is originally from the Hudson Valley region of upstate New York. Before... [More by Katie Langley](#)