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Waldoboro Works Together for Good Medomak River Water Quality

WALDOBORO – Over the past 12 months a unique collaboration between state, town and local partners has been testing the waters of the Medomak River for bacterial pollution in an effort to improve the river's water quality.

The Medomak River is important to residents for a variety of economic, recreational and scenic values. But one of the most important natural resources in the watershed is the water in the Medomak River itself. Water from the river provides essential habitat for wildlife and impacts natural resource based industries, recreation and the overall health of the local ecosystem and landscape.

The Medomak River is classified as a conditional river for purposes of shellfish harvesting. This means that if an inch of rain falls in a 24 hour period, the majority of the Medomak is closed to the 175 shellfish harvesters who are licensed to harvest. In some years, this has resulted in the river being closed for more than half the harvest year, and a loss in product value in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

For more than 10 years, Waldoboro shellfish harvesters have been trying to increase their number of harvest days by improving the water quality of the river. Led by Glen Melvin and Abden Simmons, Waldoboro shellfish harvesters appealed many times to the Department of Marine Resources, to the state legislature, and to others, asking for their help in testing the river and addressing closure issues. Over the years the responses to their requests ran the gamut of being heard, tabled, dismissed, and put aside for budgetary reasons. So, teaming up with the Medomak Valley Land Trust and the University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Waldoboro shellfish harvesters struck out on their own to clean up the river. Some problems were found and solved, but without help from the state, the full magnitude of the issue could not be addressed.

Not willing to quit, Melvin and Simmons reached out again to Department of Marine Resources (DMR), now under new leadership, and were encouraged by the positive response. They were told that DMR would do all they could to help, but to fully tackle the problem they would need the support of the town and other state agencies.

In January of 2013 Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Patricia Aho, Department of Marine Resources Commissioner Patrick Keliher and Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry Commissioner Walt Whitcomb gave their support to the establishment of a water quality working group, which began investigating the pollution issues further.

"I commend the collaboration between these agencies to identify concerns and work together for a cleaner Medomak River," said Governor Paul R. LePage. "Maine's economy is tied to its natural resources industries, which depend on a healthy environment. My administration is committed to

advancing efforts necessary to protect our natural resources and improve economic opportunity for hardworking Mainers."

Members of the working group include representatives from DEP, DMR, DACF, the Town of Waldoboro, the Waldoboro Shellfish Committee, the Waldoboro Utility District and the Medomak Valley Land Trust. DEP Commissioner Aho agreed to have DEP facilitate the process and designated veteran DEP staffer Phil Garwood to chair the working group chairperson. Phil accepted this challenge without hesitation and has done an excellent job in this capacity.

The 2013 project has focused on sampling in the Medomak River estuary, along the river in Waldoboro village and upstream. The group is using the data to identify potential sources coming from failed septic systems, runoff from farms, problems with sewer lines and other point sources. The biggest "hot spot" for bacteria was identified upstream in the river, adjacent to North American Kelp's (NAK) facility on Cross Street. This sampling site frequently tested high for bacteria, even without a rainfall event. Thanks to the in-depth investigation by DEP and the full cooperation of the folks at NAK, the issue was identified and resolved. NAK has two discharges, related to their evaporation system, that the Department has decided do not need permits. In one, river water is taken in as cooling water to help condense the water vapor produced in the evaporation unit and it is then discharged back to the river. In the other, the condensed water vapor from the evaporation unit, along with well water, are discharged to the river. The two systems are designed to be completely separate, but during their investigative work, NAK found that the cooling water was leaking into the cooling tubes where the water vapor turns to condensate. The bacteria from the river loved the warm water from the evaporator and grew like mad in it, resulting in extremely high bacteria numbers in the evaporator water discharge. NAK has repaired the leak and scrupulously cleaned the whole evaporator system. The last tests showed that bacteria levels had been reduced to undetectable levels in the evaporator discharge and were not being increased in the cooling water.

The Town and the Waldoboro Utility District have also played important roles in this effort by providing information concerning the ownership and historical uses properties, locations of small streams and drainage ditches and pipes and the wastewater system. The Town has also taken the lead in working with town residents to repair failed septic systems.

Outreach completed by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry has assisted operations of various sizes improve their operations and reduce their liability. The Department educates landowners about the use of Best Management Practices for their particular site which reflects the number of animals kept, the lot size, etc. The response to this educational activity has been positive and has assisted in the mitigation of harmful bacteria which lead to detrimental shellfish flat closures. Improving water quality water can be achieved by simple activities such as increasing amount of grass cover left in a pasture, increasing setbacks to sensitive features, or improving buffering characteristics. In some instances it may be a little more involved such as relocating a manure pile or restricting animal access to certain areas.

Going forward, the working group will continue to collect samples from areas of the river and to work cooperatively with landowners, as was done with North American Kelp, to address problems they find. The members of the group will also continue to advocate for the river so that it continues to be a priority both locally and at the state level.

The Department of Marine Resources will use the information collected in 2013 to evaluate the possibility of increasing the shellfish harvest area in the upper Medomak River. Data necessary to justify an increased harvest area are required to satisfy federal requirements of the National Shellfish Sanitation Program (NSSP) and the Food and Drug Administration. These requirements include updated information on actual and potential pollution sources and confirmation of remediation efforts of these pollution issues by the town. Additional information required by the NSSP includes an assessment of hydrographics of the river along with water sampling data confirming pollution is no longer an issue. With the assistance of project partners, DMR will compile and assess these data in the next few months to determine if changes can be made to the upper Medomak River in 2014.

While great progress has been made, there is still work to be done and there are opportunities for people to help at many levels. We all have an impact on the watershed's health. Daily activities on our own properties, including how we care for our yards and dispose of waste from dogs and chickens, may seem unimportant, but these small actions can have a significant impact on water quality. The working group encourages residents and user groups to think about the impact they have on runoff and help in whatever ways they can to help keep the river clean.

For more information contact the working group chair, Phil Garwood (DEP), at phil.e.garwood@maine.gov .

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