Fish and Wildlife Department Critical of CMP Plan

Maine’s Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has stepped up big time to criticize Central Maine Power’s proposal to construct a massive new transmission line through Maine to move electricity from Quebec to Massachusetts. The good people of New Hampshire rejected CMP’s proposal, so they’ve moved it to Maine.

“Clear and compelling information is necessary demonstrating New England Clean Energy Connect’s efforts to avoid and minimize unreasonable adverse impacts to natural resources,” wrote Robert Stratton, DIFW’s Fisheries and Wildlife Program Support Section Supervisor, in a June 29 letter to CMP.

DIFW identified lots of troubling things in CMP’s plan and issued a lengthy list of changes that would have to be made to protect fish and wildlife and the habitats they depend on. And even after listing lots of specific concerns, Stratton wrote that “This is certainly not a comprehensive list, thus MDIFW recommends that CMP further assess the proposed transmission corridor for similar issues and opportunities to avoid or minimize impacts in the proposed corridor and to identify possible impact mitigation (restoration) opportunities in the existing co-located corridor.”

For example, DIFW reported that the line will go through several important deer wintering areas which are critical in protecting deer during our snowy and cold winters. And CMP plans to provide only a 25-foot buffer around all streams along the Project. “It is MDIFW’s position that this minimal buffer will not be adequate to protect coldwater resources,” they wrote. DIFW is insisting that 100-foot buffers be measured from the upland edge of stream or associated fringe and floodplain wetlands.

“As proposed,” wrote DIFW, “without the protection of 100-foot buffers at all streams, the quality of fisheries and habitat in these watersheds will be impaired. This is also critically important for the other stream-dependent species of concern noted earlier in this document.”

They also reported that 724 water bodies would be intersected by the NECE transmission line corridor, 184 of which will be spanned by construction access roads, which will involve a tremendous amount of clearing.

The department also reported that “it is likely that State-listed Endangered, Threatened, and Special Concern Species are resident or transient in the Project area based on location, habitats present, and life history requirements of the individual species present.” And DIFW offered a detailed list of recommendations for specific species.

The department also had asked CMP for information on vernal pools that would be disturbed, but did not receive that information.

The four chairs of our legislature’s Committees on Environment and Natural Resources and Utilities and Technology expressed their strong opposition to this project in a May 4 letter to the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities. Republican Senators Tom Saviello and David Woodsome and Democratic Representatives Ralph Tucker and Seth Berry presented very compelling arguments against the project.

They noted that the project will not reduce and may actually increase total greenhouse gas emissions, may result in lost jobs, tax revenue, and energy investment in Maine, and does not offer meaningful financial benefits to the people of Maine. They noted that experts from our PUC report that CMP inaccurately inflated projected benefits to Maine.

They reported that the project will suppress existing and future renewable energy generation in Maine due in part to increased congestion on the transmission line. In their letter, these legislators also expressed one of my key concerns, the negative impacts on wildlife, forests, and clean water.

We’ve already lost too many deer wintering areas in the north woods, creating severe problems for our outdoor industries including guides and sporting camps. We’ve gone from more than 300 to about 3 dozen of our traditional sporting camps. While working on a book about Maine’s sporting camps for Down East Books, I asked camp owners what their greatest challenges are, and most said the loss of hunters and anglers. CMP’s project will only make that problem worse.

And of course, this project will drive many tourists out of western and northern Maine, another cruel blow to sporting camps, guides, and rural Maine businesses and towns.

I love the Kennebec Gorge, a magnificent unspoiled section of the Kennebec River in the Forks. Our legislators correctly described the Gorge as “a world-renowned whitewater rafting and fishing spot.” I’ve rafted the Gorge numerous times and even took Linda on a guided fishing adventure in the Gorge one time. CMP proposes to stick their line right over the Gorge, a truly horrible idea.

New Hampshire rejected this proposal due to overstated economic benefits and underestimated environmental risks. Why would Maine find any of this acceptable?

With permission to submit by George Smith, author