

History of Lamprey River Protection

Protection of the Lamprey River began in the late 1970s when two separate but related needs were identified: a river management plan and a group that could spearhead efforts to study and protect the river. A river management plan coalesces how to protect and manage key resources. Identifying those resources depends on motivated individuals who best know the river and experts who can build on that knowledge.

A planner at Strafford Regional Planning Commission was able to secure a grant to create a river management plan. The group of river champions that emerged to coordinate the effort was the Lamprey River Watershed Association (LRWA), formally established in 1983. The LRWA today serves as the fiduciary agent for the Wild and Scenic Subcommittee and executes cooperative agreements on its behalf with the NPS.

In the 1980s, as energy policy in the United States shifted to favoring alternatives to fossil fuel, the development of hydroelectric power became a major political and economic force. Significant funding and incentives were available to entities looking to expand this source of power. Hydroelectric power already existed at the Macallen Dam in Newmarket and a new proposal to establish a hydroelectric facility at Wiswall Dam in Durham was submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) in 1982. After some local objections were aired but rejected, FERC issued a license in June of 1989 to the applicant for developing the site.

As local residents and municipalities raced to learn more about hydroelectric power and wrestled with the idea of a hydroelectric facility controlling water normally available for recreation and public water supply, objections to the project grew. Residents recognized, correctly, that FERC was an entity not easily stopped or dissuaded. American Rivers offered critical legal advice and a long-shot suggestion: convince local citizens, municipal officials, and federal representatives to support a Wild and Scenic study for the Lamprey River. In September 1989, selectmen in the towns of Lee and Durham passed resolutions in support of a Wild and Scenic study for the Lamprey River.

At approximately the same time, the New Hampshire General Court enacted legislation creating the Rivers Management and Protection Program to safeguard New Hampshire's best rivers. With little time to spare, the LRWA members generously gave their time, energy, and financial resources to document the resources in and along the Lamprey to support the bid for nomination to the state program. The thinking was that if the river was considered an asset to New Hampshire and designated to the state rivers program, the argument that it was also an asset to the United States would be a logical next step.

In 1990, the Lamprey River in the towns of Lee and Durham was successfully designated as one of the first five rivers in the state program. As a result of designation, the Lamprey River Advisory Committee (LRAC) was formed to effect enhanced river protection and management.

More legal appeals against the hydroelectric license were submitted in 1990 and again FERC's position prevailed. In February of 1991, New Hampshire's freshman Congressman Bill Zeff and senators Judd Gregg and Warren Rudman introduced bills in the US House of Representatives and the US Senate for a Wild and Scenic Study of the Lamprey River. In December, the bill was signed into law. In February of 1992, FERC ordered a stay of license for construction of the Wiswall hydroelectric facility pending the outcome of the Wild and Scenic River Study.

The effort to document the river-related resources of the Lamprey River culminated in 1994 with the publication of the Lamprey River Resource Assessment. This soon was followed by the publication of the Lamprey River Management Plan in January 1995. The NPS's Lamprey Wild and Scenic River Study Draft Report was published in June 1995. On November 12, 1996, the Lamprey River in Lee, Durham, and Newmarket was designated as a Wild and Scenic River by the US Congress (PL 104-333). That was the end of any discussion about a new hydroelectric facility on the river. In 2000, a section of the river in the town of Epping was added to the original designation (PL 106-192), resulting in a total of 23.5 miles of river protected.

The process of gathering details for the study and creating the management plan helped to turn many opponents into strong advocates for the Lamprey River. Citizens and municipalities learned that they shared a desire to protect a valued resource. Some initially hesitant town leaders came to understand that Wild and Scenic designation did not mean less local control; it brought significant, long-lasting benefits. The designation was a triumph of how the river community rallied to stop the unstoppable by overcoming wide-spread ignorance of the impacts of hydroelectric power, the true (versus predicted) energy potential of hydroelectric power, and the complexity of hydroelectric licensing, as well as how to build and win public support and lobby politicians. Perhaps most importantly, the community found the courage to do it.

In a twist of irony, the grant secured in the early 1980s by the Strafford Regional Planning Commission to support the development of a river management plan came from a fund reserved for rivers with hydroelectric facilities. The hydroelectric plant in Newmarket, located outside the Wild and Scenic designated area, independently ceased operations. The financial resources ostensibly intended to increase hydroelectric power generation on the Lamprey River instead helped to ensure that the river's flow would not be altered in the future by new dams or hydroelectric facility construction.

In 2011, after more research and tireless work garnering unanimous support from the fourteen communities in the Lamprey River watershed, the entire Lamprey River and five of its major tributaries were designated under the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program. This was the first and, to date, only time an entire river watershed was afforded state protection. The 2013 Lamprey Rivers Management Plan effectively integrates goals for the entire river for both the state and Wild and Scenic programs. From an unlikely start, the Lamprey has taken the lead. Stay tuned as the Lamprey and the people working hard to protect it forge ahead into the future.