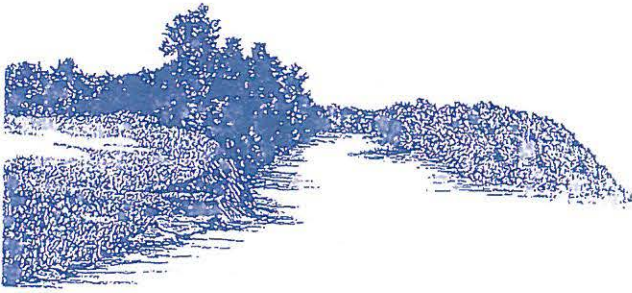


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Saco River Corridor Commission

"Communities Working Together To Protect Our Rivers"

Senator Denise Tepler, Chair
Representative Victoria Doudera, Chair
Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
c/o Legislative Information Office
100 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

January 31, 2026

In RE: Report on the Saco River Corridor Fund

Dear Senator Tepler and Representative Doudera:

The Saco River Corridor Commission (hereafter, "SRCC" or "Commission") was established by the Legislature in 1973 to oversee and administer the Saco River Corridor Act (hereafter, the "Act"). The Commission works to guide development, ensure protective practices, and prevent incompatible land uses within 500 feet of the Saco River and its two major tributaries, the Ossipee, and Little Ossipee. Where the 100-year floodplain extends beyond 500 feet, the Corridor's jurisdiction expands to cover areas up to 1,000 feet from these rivers. Made up of volunteer representatives appointed by municipalities along the Rivers, the Commission protects ecological and public health in the Corridor, along with the quality of life in our communities. This is the 53rd year of the SRCC's ongoing efforts, and we are as committed as ever to the purpose of protecting the Corridor and its Rivers.

The Saco River and its groundwater are the sole source of municipal drinking water for the growing cities of Saco and Biddeford. Additionally, many local landowners and towns utilize wells or surface waters adjacent to the Saco and its major tributaries. Because of their scenic character and proximity to population centers, the Saco, Ossipee, and Little Ossipee Rivers are also key attractors for recreational activity, helping local economies. Recreational users can expect reasonably safe, scenic waters for swimming, boating, and tubing, thanks to the protection of functional vegetative buffers and judicious setbacks for high-impact activities. To maintain the security of drinking water supplies and the health, safety, and attractiveness of river recreation, the Commission enforces standards derived from the Act to reduce or avoid negative impacts from development. The SRCC's work seeks to ensure appropriate and balanced land use, offering enhanced protection over the Mandatory Shoreland Zoning Act.

Maine's 118th Legislature revised the Act by way of Public Law 1997, chapter 330, §1, to create the Saco River Corridor Fund (the Fund), now described in Title 38, §969. This means of funding the Commission's continuing operations includes a 1% fee on the sale of water and fire protection services by a water utility drawing water from the Saco River or its groundwater. The Fund helps protect existing water quality by partially underwriting the SRCC. The revenues support operational costs of our Land Use Regulatory Program, Water Quality Monitoring Program, and Educational Outreach efforts, each of which is described below. The Saco River Corridor Fund collected \$169,905.10 in FY25. Interest accumulation was \$1,294.01, for a total of \$171,354.26 made available via the Fund between July 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025. This amount is higher than in any previous year due to rate increases approved by the Public Utilities Commission in 2017 and increased sales of water from the Saco River. This recent increase in funding has been a much-needed improvement to the organization's financial status, allowing a limited but necessary expansion to our staff, now planned for 2026.

Water Quality Monitoring Program

The SRCC is now approaching its 25th consecutive season of the Water Quality Monitoring (hereafter, "WQM") Program, established to determine a baseline of water quality in the Saco River Basin, monitor for trends over time, and to identify potential threats to drinking water and recreation. This joint program, run alongside the Green Mountain Conservation Group (hereafter, "GMCG"), encompasses one watershed, two states, and twenty-six towns. The GMCG monitors the water flowing toward Maine at 28 sites in the Ossipee Lake watershed, while the SRCC samples 43 sites along the three Corridor rivers, assessing basic quality parameters, nitrogen and phosphorus loads, and potentially harmful bacteria levels, including *E. coli* and Enterococcus. Each year, as a subset of our total sampling, high-recreation sites are tested for bacterial levels more frequently during the summer.

Our sampling is managed by a seasonal Water Quality Coordinator with help from community volunteers to ensure all samples are taken with proper protocols and the data is promptly and accurately recorded. Thanks to our ability to test bacterial samples in-house, SRCC can provide next-day alerts to municipal offices when bacteria levels exceed state thresholds. To better inform the public, we maintain an online dashboard updated throughout the season with the latest status of each site. We also make our raw data available upon request to municipalities and others who may benefit from it.

The WQM program's Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP) was renewed by ME DEP, NH DES, and the EPA in 2020, and our 2025 update to the QAPP is undergoing a final review. The SRCC's growing body of data helps to gauge the success of water quality protection efforts along the Corridor. At present, the limiting factor on our ability to expand the WQM program is personnel, and we eventually hope to transition the seasonal WQM coordinator position into a year-round role to increase efficiency, pursue education and outreach efforts, and expand the scope of testing. Unfortunately, this step is out of reach for now.

In 2026, the Commission will once again hire a full-time seasonal WQM Coordinator from March to September. The Coordinator works to ensure consistent and high-quality data by monitoring sites, testing samples in-house, handling sample delivery to labs, managing and training volunteers, maintaining equipment and our database, and communicating bacterial results to municipalities. While we continue to collaborate with the Green Mountain Conservation Group for volunteer training events, the role of WQM Program Manager has been temporarily discontinued and its responsibilities shifted to SRCC's Executive Director. This includes regular quality-control checks and the preparation of annual water quality reports for each Corridor town. While municipal contributions are solicited to help support the Water Quality Program, and the SRCC thanks the Cities of Saco and Biddeford in particular for their support, the Saco River Corridor Fund is also essential to this program's budget.

Land-Use Regulatory Program

The Saco River Corridor Fund significantly supports the SRCC's Land Use Regulatory Program, which fulfills the statutory requirements of the Act. Under this program, the Commission issues permits for land and water uses within the Corridor, whether it is for construction of a home, shoreline stabilization, or renovation of municipal facilities. Our volunteer Commissioners (one regular member and one alternate appointed by each Corridor community) meet to review about 15-25 applications and amendments each month except December. Committees of the Commission also guide application review, financial and administrative matters, and rulemaking. The SRCC's staff handles the bulk of office communications and research related to the permitting process, and the Commission's Environmental Compliance Evaluator visits each site to confirm the dimensions, setbacks, potential concerns, and outcomes of proposed activities.

Throughout this process, the staff communicates extensively with applicants and their agents, assisting them in conforming their applications to the standards in the Act and helping them adequately document their proposals. This entails telephone consultations, research, meetings, and written correspondence, often involving the applicant's surveyors, engineers, contractors, or attorneys. The Commission maintains a unique online database that documents every new application and includes many years of past applications. Work continues to digitize the older records running back to 1974, as resources allow. A digital directory established in 2020 now makes older permits easier to locate, helping to form a more complete picture of a property's history when the Commission considers new applications.

The three districts of the Corridor were identified with input from municipalities in 1974, and the resulting maps have been modified by decisions of the Commission since that time, as well as by changes in the defined 100-year floodplain. In 2019, an interactive online map of the Corridor was created and made accessible to the public and municipalities as a planning tool. A major update to the floodplain maps by FEMA in 2024 has prompted staff to begin a town-by-town update to the digital map. When completed, the revised map will help increase understanding of the Corridor's jurisdictional boundaries. Along with increased availability of aerial photography and other digital tools, the SRCC is continuing to use technology to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the Commission.

The Commission also monitors violations of the Act and seeks remediation. Addressing a violation can involve extensive communication with potential or known violators, notices of violation, consent and enforcement agreements, revegetation plans, required clean-up or removal of unpermitted structures, and/or monetary penalties that are sent to the State General Fund. Pursuing violations of the Act is an extremely important but also time-consuming process and is heavily dependent on our staff capacity. When necessary, the Commission relies on consultation with the Assistant Attorney General's office to answer critical legal questions, review consent agreements, and assist in the case of compliance failure. In the upcoming fiscal year, SRCC intends to hire a part-time position largely to assist with resolving, tracking, and hopefully preventing violations, made possible by the recently increased revenue from the Saco River Corridor Fund.

In FY24, the Commission reviewed 131 applications for development in the Corridor, representing a still-elevated rate compared to the pre-pandemic period (60-70 applications/year was common in 2010-2018). With the increase in active projects in the past five years, there is a concurrent increase in compliance checks, amendments, tree removal requests, and, unfortunately, also more violations. Processing permits and addressing violations often involves coordination with other permitting agencies, so our interaction with municipal staff has also increased in recent years. This need for collaboration between SRCC staff, local code enforcement officers, town officials, and interested citizens helps further one of the Commission's goals: to connect and work with local individuals and municipalities, creating the best collective outcome for the Corridor and the health of our rivers. As the next section describes, outreach to the community is key to the SRCC's work.

Educational Outreach Program

Every year, the Commission analyzes WQM data collected in each municipality, highlighting water quality trends and proposing recommendations to address identified issues. This analysis, provided to each municipality and made available to residents, assists community leaders in making informed land- and water-use decisions, and helps raise awareness of the Commission, the Saco River Corridor Act, and the methods by which water quality can be protected and improved.

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Our staffed office plays an important role in disseminating information, helping landowners to understand the importance of water quality and abide by the Saco River Corridor Act. We often serve as a resource for applicants seeking best practices for projects within the Corridor, including those involving erosion control, vegetative buffers, and revegetation. Our Compliance Evaluator, speaking directly with landowners on the ground, is also an important communicator. When possible, the SRCC office pursues educational outreach to the public, realtors, and contractors to increase understanding of our work.

With development pressure, increased recreation, and frequent flooding, it is important that the Act's standards are adequately communicated to the public, and especially to landowners and contractors whose actions affect these protected lands and waters. Through the staff's ongoing efforts, we aim to help prevent accidental violations of the Act and promote positive community engagement with our work.

In Conclusion

The staff and our dedicated volunteers, including our sworn Commissioners, work within a tight budget to administer the Saco River Corridor Act, engage meaningfully with our communities, and monitor water quality in one of Maine's most important waterways. The Saco River Corridor Fund is essential to maintaining effective administration of the Act and the services the Commission office provides.

I continue to be amazed at the long-term effect of the Act on the Rivers and their surrounding communities. Reading the original comprehensive plan known as "View from the Valley" (1973), I am struck by how close to the original vision for the Commission this organization remains. The originators of this legislation wanted locally controlled, consistent oversight and protection for the Rivers and the lands around them, so that degradation of the waters, loss of scenic value, and intensive overcrowding would not be the inevitable future. Fifty-three years later, we remain committed to the same goals, and the SRCC is still relevant, necessary, and remarkably effective for the resources it has. Over this time, the Corridor has primarily seen an improvement rather than degradation of water quality, and there is so much interest in recreation on this still-scenic river that *overuse* is more of an issue than attracting tourism. Although successful management of the Corridor to date is not a reason to be complacent and many problems still exist, significant credit can be given to the efforts of the Legislature, the Commissioners, and the SRCC staff and volunteers over time to see the outcome that we are grateful to have – beautiful waterways that children can play in, wildlife can live along, yet cities and towns can also thrive beside; a balance of uses that we hope will continue long into the future.

The Saco River Corridor Fund represents more than half of the revenue supporting the SRCC's operational costs, including the salaries of our two full-time and two part-time or seasonal staff positions. The Fund ensures the SRCC can maintain its essential programs, complete its statutory responsibilities, and maintain oversight of an increasingly busy Corridor, including critical improvements to equipment, technology, recordkeeping, and staff capacity.

If there are any questions about the content of this report or the Commission in general, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,



Cheri Dunning
Executive Director
Saco River Corridor Commission