

POLICY BRIEF - A New Chapter for Maine's Atlantic Salmon: Exploring a Limited Catch-and-Release Season on the Penobscot River

Prepared for:

Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife
Joint Standing Committee on Marine Resources
Joint Standing Committee Environment and Natural Resources

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Issue Overview

For generations, Atlantic salmon angling on the Penobscot River was a cornerstone of Maine's cultural identity and a significant driver of local economies—from guide services and tackle shops to sporting lodges and tourism. The river once drew anglers from around the world to Maine, captivated by the legendary runs of "king of fish" leaping upstream. That proud tradition has been paused with the decline of wild salmon, but today, with return numbers rising and restoration progress gaining momentum, Maine stands at the threshold of a new chapter. By supporting a conservation-designed Limited Catch-and-Release Season, legislators and citizens alike have a chance to make history—reviving a heritage fishery in a way that protects the species, advances science, and reconnects communities to the river that helped shape them.

Atlantic salmon are federally listed as endangered and currently off-limits to all forms of recreational fishing in U.S. waters. With proper oversight and scientific rigor, Maine has an opportunity to explore a **limited, conservation-oriented catch-and-release season** that could promote stewardship, support salmon science, and reinforce Maine's legacy as a leader in fisheries recovery.

Why This Matters

- **Cultural Significance:** Atlantic salmon are deeply embedded in Maine's identity, representing a tradition that spans generations.
- **Public Engagement:** Citizens and anglers want to support salmon recovery—but lack any legal way to do so through direct interaction.

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- **Scientific Opportunity:** Controlled catch-and-release seasons offer a chance to tag fish, gather genetic data, and assess health in ways not easily achieved at fishways.
 - **Imbalance of Risk:** Atlantic salmon continue to suffer higher-than-acknowledged mortality at dams with limited fish passage. A seasonal, science-backed angling model poses **less risk and more return**.
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Proposal Summary

We urge the Legislature to support a collaborative initiative—coordinated with NOAA Fisheries, the Penobscot Nation, Maine Department of Marine Resources, and conservation partners—to:

1. **Initiate a Feasibility Study** on a limited, permit-based catch-and-release salmon season on the Penobscot
 2. **Support a Section 10(a)(1)(A) Permit Application** under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for scientific and recovery enhancement purposes
 3. **Explore legislative or administrative support mechanisms** to enable implementation if federally approved
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Key Safeguards of the Proposed Season

- **Strict Time Windows:** Short season during ideal (cool) water conditions to reduce fish stress
- **Limited Permits & Training:** Issued by lottery or application, with mandatory angler training and barbless hook requirements
- **Monitoring:** Real-time oversight by agency scientists, tribal monitors, and data-sharing agreements
- **Adaptive Management:** Season immediately suspended if fish health or environmental indicators decline

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Expected Benefits

- ✓ **Boosts Public Conservation Ethic**
 - ✓ **Gathers Crucial Scientific Data**
 - ✓ **Models Responsible Stewardship of Endangered Species**
 - ✓ **Reinforces Maine's Fisheries Leadership**
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Next Steps

We respectfully request:

- **A Legislative Resolution or Letter of Support** to federal agencies for exploration of a pilot season
 - **Hearings or briefings** to review science, safeguards, and public interest
 - A commitment to collaborative planning between state, tribal, and federal stakeholders
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