August 2024

Greetings Miramichi Camps, Outfitters, Guides, and Anglers,

We write to you today as a joint communication between the Miramichi Salmon Association and the Atlantic Salmon Federation to provide a positive update on an issue that is top-of-mind for everyone: striped bass management. Significant progress has been made this spring and summer that will help Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi and promote improved balance in the broader ecosystem between striped bass and other native species.

Our organizations, in close partnership with the North Shore Mi'kmaq Tribal Council, Anqotum Resource Management, the Miramichi Watershed Management Committee, New Brunswick Salmon Council, and the New Brunswick Wildlife Federation have worked relentlessly as a team over the past number of years, particularly the last 12 months, to bring change to Fisheries and Oceans Canada's striped bass management.

Our position was also supported by the Maritime Fishermen's Union and other associate commercial fishing associations from the Maritime provinces and Quebec, creating a unique circumstance where conservation groups, First Nations, and the commercial fishing industry have worked together.

For background, the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence population has grown from 3,000 spawning adults in the late 1990s to approximately 500,000 spawners as of the most recent assessment in 2022. The primary spawning ground is in the Northwest Miramichi estuary, where striped bass aggregate in immense quantities in spring for several weeks at precisely the time Atlantic salmon smolt are migrating out of the river to the ocean. Currently, DFO has set the minimum size for the spawning population of striped bass at 330,000 individuals.

During this exceptional period of population growth for striped bass, our smolt tracking program produced alarming results. Over the past 20 years, we have been tracking salmon smolt survival in the Southwest Miramichi, Northwest Miramichi, Restigouche, and Cascapedia rivers.

Prior to the explosion of striped bass, smolt survival through the Northwest Miramichi estuary was 55-75% in the early 2000s, meaning two-thirds to three-quarters of the river's smolt made it to salt water to begin their ocean journey to the North Atlantic. In recent years, Northwest Miramichi smolt survival has plummeted to less than 10% through the estuary. Southwest Miramichi smolt survival through the estuary has declined less severely, but still drastically, from approximately 60% down to 20-30%.

Meanwhile, on the Restigouche and Cascapedia, where there are no aggregations of striped bass spawners during the smolt migration, survival through their estuaries has remained consistently high at roughly 80-90%.

Recognizing the acute issue on the Miramichi and the urgent need to help salmon and other native fish in the ecosystem that have also experienced declines, like gaspereau, smelt, and sea run brook trout, our coalition of groups joined forces with the aim to generate change in the way DFO manages striped bass. Our goal is to achieve a more balanced ecosystem with healthy populations of all native species, including striped bass and certainly Atlantic salmon.

Our requests to DFO were clear:

1. **Set a management target** – Establish an ecosystem-based management target of 100,000 striped bass spawners. A population of this size would continue to support healthy striped bass fisheries, while allowing much improved smolt survival through the estuary. Other native fish like sea run brook trout, smelt, and gaspereau would benefit as well.

2. **Achieve the target** – Use the established Indigenous commercial striped bass fishery at Eel Ground First Nation as the primary mechanism to achieve the management target. Allow Eel Ground to use 6 trapnets instead of 4 in 2024 in order to reach their quota of 50,000 fish, and then grow the quota.

3. **Recreational fishery** – Liberalize the recreational fishery regulations for striped bass:
    - Increase the daily bag limit
    - Remove the upper size slot limit of 65 cm in coastal waters
    - Allow any sized striped bass to be retained in inland waters to reduce risk of prolonged periods of interaction between striped bass and juvenile Atlantic salmon in freshwater

To pursue these changes, we have tried many avenues with DFO. When we hit a dead-end road, we would try another approach. Over the past year, we have met with the following top officials:

- DFO Minister and her policy advisors
- DFO Deputy Minister
- DFO Assistant Deputy Minister
- DFO Regional Director General
- DFO Regional Director of Science
- DFO Regional Director of Resource Management
- DFO Regional Director of Ecosystems Management
- Many lower levels of DFO staff
- Governor General of Canada
- Premier of New Brunswick
- New Brunswick Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development
- New Brunswick Deputy Minister of Nature Resources and Energy Development

To say the least, we have put in a relentless effort to generate needed change, and we are pleased to report that DFO has made significant changes. Here is a summary:

Recreational fishery

- Bag limit increase from 3 to 4 fish/day
- Relaxed night fishing hours
- Special scientific license issued to some outfitters on the Miramichi to allow retention of any number and size striped bass. The intent here is to gather information on timing and distribution of bass in the river, and to alleviate predation pressure on juvenile salmon.

Commercial fishery

- Increase from 4 to 6 trapnets in Eel Ground's fishery on the Northwest Miramichi
- Increase in commercial quota from 50,000 to 175,000 fish beginning in 2025

The changes are in line with DFO's precautionary approach fisheries management framework, which allows for greater harvest of a fish stock as the stock grows in abundance. The changes will provide much needed relief for Atlantic salmon smolt in the estuary.

The work is not done, it will take time to build up capacity in the fishery, likely several years to catch the new quota of 175,000, but now there is something to work with. We'll take that challenge, and we are committed to helping the commercial fishery be a success by working closely with our Indigenous partners, so that it can be a success for salmon.

Striped bass impact is grave, but it is not the only issue affecting salmon on the Miramichi. Our organizations have also been working hard to address other problems like enhancing coldwater sanctuaries to mitigate against warming water, protecting forests through New Brunswick's Nature Legacy program, fighting invasive smallmouth bass in the headwaters, and bringing more large spawners back to the Miramichi through the Greenland Salmon Conservation Agreement. We are continuing our long-term smolt tracking program, which served as the foundation for our advocacy on striped bass. And most recently, we are being pro-active by capturing and trucking a subset of the smolt run on the Northwest Miramichi around the mass of striped bass in an experimental intervention program.

We are very pleased with DFO's changes to striped bass management this spring and we're optimistic that this is the beginning of the recovery for Atlantic salmon on the Miramichi.

Sincerely,

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