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## Merrimack salmon restoration program to end

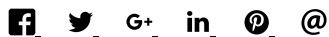
By Alex Lippa

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Claudia Ostadelafont, a fish biologist, and volunteer Bion Eastbrook handle an Atlantic salmon at the Nashua National Fish Hatchery.

Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
The Eagle-Tribune



Funding and optimism for restoring Atlantic salmon to the Merrimack River have dried up.

The Merrimack River Atlantic Salmon Program will be shut down after 38 years.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will announce today they will stop stocking the river with Atlantic salmon, due to a low population returns and budgetary concerns.

"Science is suggesting that these fish just aren't returning," said Joe McKeon, supervisory fish biologist with U.S. Fish and Wildlife in Nashua. "Because of that, we are going to be stepping away from the Atlantic salmon restoration."

For decades, more than 1 million salmon fry were released into the Merrimack River every year. Last year, only 750,000 were released. The fish are released in the fall in the river's tributaries.

By cutting the program, the Fish and Wildlife Service will save \$750,000 a year, money that will be allocated to other resources. No jobs will be cut due to the program's closure, McKeon said.

Biologists count the returning salmon at the Essex dam in Lawrence in the spring. The first 300 salmon — if there are that many — are taken back to the hatchery in Nashua to be used to produce the next year's fry.

But rarely have 300 salmon returned.

McKeon said just 22 fish returned this year. In 2011, there were more than 400.

"We believe that to be the anomaly," he said. "But the stark reality is that we are seeing the changing climate affect the habitat and the food base."

Budget cuts also contributed to the decision to stop the program.

"We have budget cuts and are under sequestration," he said. "So we've had to restructure some things."

Fish and Wildlife already has shifted resources to the American shad, which is being stocked in New Hampshire rivers, McKeon said.

It's also the end for the Atlantic salmon brood stock fishery. That program, which directly benefited sport fishing, has operated since 1993. Those salmon were released after they provided eggs for the restoration program.

The announcement was disappointing to program advocates.

"It's sad," said Gerry Crow, a licensed New Hampshire fishing guide. "This program helped bring the focus to improving the watershed to help these species recover. We risk losing a lot of that focus and work."

George Embley, a member of the Merrimack River chapter of Trout Unlimited, said officials should have waited for the return numbers to go back up.

"The returns go up and down," he said. "Looking at the history of returns, they have varied. I don't think anyone can predict what will happen."

Crow said some people come to New Hampshire specifically to fish for Atlantic salmon.

"It gave people a taste of what a real Atlantic salmon program used to look like," he said. "Many people came from out of state to fish for them and they, in turn, buy state fishing permits."

This is the second Atlantic salmon restoration program that has been closed in the last two years. In May 2012, the service ended a similar restoration effort in the Connecticut River. When that was announced, they extended the Merrimack River program until 2015.

"We have to step back early," McKeon said. "But we will likely still have some salmon in the station and we will be releasing those. We will continue to monitor that and if things change, then there will be an opportunity to bring it back."

McKeon said the lone Atlantic salmon restoration program remaining is in the Saco River in Maine.

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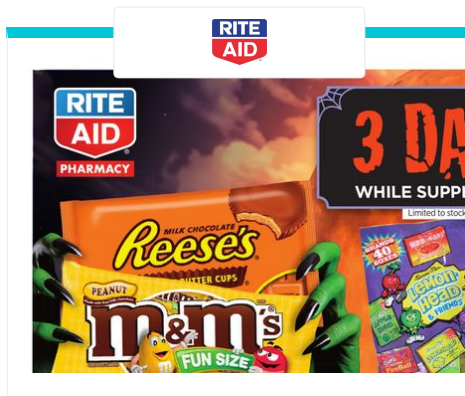
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	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON
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