

Podcast Transcript
Fish Passage: Culvert Replacement
Rhon F. Salmon, USFWS

Rhon Salmon-

The following story is a series of interviews that tell how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Fisheries Program is helping local communities while conserving our nation's fish resources in Maine

The survival of the endangered Atlantic salmon and other aquatic species hinges on the accessibility and suitability of habitats across the state. Only 5% of Maine's freshwater habitat is fully accessible and suitable for the Salmon and other native fish. I am Rhon Salmon from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and I am talking to some fish passage specialists in Maine.

Scott Craig, project leader of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Maine Fishery Resources Office and partner Steve Koenig, executive director of the Salmon Habitat and River Enhancement plan known as Project SHARE, are removing centuries-old dams and replacing culverts blocking fish and fragmenting rivers. Project SHARE in Steve's words.

Steve Koenig-

SHARE was created as a partnership of stakeholders back in 1994, I guess you'd say the genesis of it—the commercial forestry industry—had a core group of people, including state and federal agency people. This new model of creating a non-profit corporation, whose sole intent was to take interested stakeholder entities that had capacity and an interest in improving salmon habitat.

Rhon Salmon-

Reconnecting Maine's rivers got an added boost through funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, also known as ARRA. Scott has the details.

Scott Craig-

SHARE received \$150,000 from us but then, they also received \$1.6 million of funds from NOAA through ARRA.

Rhon Salmon-

By the end of 2010, Project SHARE and Maine Fishery Resources Office installed over a hundred and twenty bottomless culverts, restoring access to aquatic species such as the Atlantic salmon. Scott explains.

Scott Craig-

We have done 79, these are all connectivity projects, so they include permanent log drive dam poles [timber], we did eight in 2009 and then we did 43 this last year. If you add those up that's about a hundred and fifty miles of improved habitat access.

Rhon Salmon-

Culvert replacement did not only benefit Atlantic salmon recovery, it also benefited local economies across a state hit by the recession. In 2010, Maine had an unemployment rate of nine percent with 13 percent of Washington County—located down east—unemployed. Scott believes the mission to restore Atlantic salmon populations brought jobs to Washington County.

Scott Craig-

It was a boost to the economy there. We had three different contractors; one did more than half of the work and the other two split other stuff [projects]. They said if it wasn't for that ARRA funds then they would have probably been laid off.

Rhon Salmon-

Given that none of the culverts installed through the project failed and landowners saved money by not dealing with road washouts during last December's floods, these designs will likely be used in future by private landowners. Tom French owns the French land base where the Maine Fishery Resources Office and Project SHARE replaced culverts last summer.

Tom French-

We haven't owned the land for that long, but in the time that we've owned it, I know of several instances where we have had washed out culverts. It just resulted in a lot of money going down the drain every year. But this past year has been great with the new culverts because we just had a huge storm maybe a month ago. A bunch of old culverts went out but none of the new ones did, we haven't even touched them. We've been very pleased.

Rhon Salmon-

Washington County residents also realized the human safety benefits from safer roads resulting from fish-friendly culverts that don't blow out in heavy rains. Scott recalls a time when blown out culverts posed a bigger threat to road safety.

Scott Craig:

In the past we've had some culverts, I'll give you one example specifically, there is a road that goes up to Grand lake stream—one of the premier landlocked Atlantic salmon fisheries in Maine. People have destroyed their vehicles when they went into a stream where the culvert blew out. No one has really died, but there has a lot of property damage to vehicles for people driving through streams where the culverts have blown out.

Rhon Salmon-

Reconnecting rivers for better fish passage is a necessary step in implementing the recovery plan for the endangered Atlantic salmon. The partnership of project SHARE and the USFWS are also helping local residents.