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Saco and Swift River Corridor Management Plan Being Developed

Advisory Committee Seeks Public Input



Updated plan intends to share the vision and values of the community members that live and play within the river corridors.

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The Saco River and Swift River headwaters both start in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, slowly forming distinct channels and draining numerous clear, cold, mountainous streams, as they flow to their confluence in the Town of Conway. The Saco River continues towards the Maine border on its the 136-mile journey from source to sea through forested landscapes, agricultural areas, village centers, and urban areas until eventually emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. The Saco and Swift rivers support diverse aquatic ecosystems and offer the White Mountain region a wealth of recreational, economic, and ecological resources. These unique river systems provide innumerable opportunities for fishing, boating, wildlife viewing, and other recreational and educational activities to local communities and visitors.

These rivers are among the few recognized by the State of New Hampshire as significant resources under the Rivers Management and Protection Program, and therefore require a Corridor Management Plan (CMP), which includes the assessment of the river's resources, values, threats, and the creation of an action plan to ensure future protection of the rivers.

The Saco-Swift River Local Advisory Committee was formed to guide the management of uses along the Saco and Swift rivers while providing leeway for natural processes and preparing for the impacts of climate change. Local Advisory Committee members are appointed by their municipalities. Members of the committee represent the corridor communities of Albany,

Bartlett, Conway, and Hart's Location, as well as the communities of Madison and Jackson, and the White Mountain National Forest. The Local Advisory Committee provides commentary and local insights to New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services reviewers when wetlands permits, or other permits potentially impacting the river corridor, are submitted to the department for consideration.

The Local Advisory Committee, with consulting help from FB Environmental Associates, funding from the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, and guidance from the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, is in the process of updating the historic Corridor Management Plans for the Saco and Swift rivers, which were published in 1994. This updated plan is intended to share the vision and values of the community members that live and play within the river corridors. To accomplish this goal, the Local Advisory Committee is seeking input from local community members that will be incorporated into the development of the final plan. Members of the community are being asked to provide feedback on their perception of the various values provided by the rivers, as well as key threats to those values.

THE RIVER CORRIDORS

River corridors are biologically diverse areas, representing aquatic, wetland, and terrestrial habitats all in close proximity, consisting of rapid geological and ecological transitions. These areas are critical habitats for plants and wildlife and provide a source of drinking water, water purification, flood control, recreation, and fertile soils. The river corridor is defined by the Rivers Management and Protection Act of 1988, as the river channel and the land area located within the distance of 1,320 feet (1/4 mile) of the normal high-water mark, or to the landward extent of the 100-year floodplain, whichever distance is greater.

The natural resources present in the Saco-Swift River Corridor include high-quality rivers and a unique landscape of rugged mountains and cliffs. The Saco River originates at Saco



ABOVE LEFT: Tubing and boating on the Saco River is very popular. The COVID-19 pandemic caused intense increases in recreational use of the region. As one local stakeholder described the increased use on the Saco River, "Every weekday is now like a weekend, and every weekend is like the Fourth of July." The Local Advisory Committee identified recreational overuse as a management concern for the river corridors. Photo credit: FB Environmental. ABOVE: Two back-to-back intense storms in late October, 2017, caused

Both the Swift River and Saco River have been enjoyed for recreation for decades. Here, families enjoy the Rocky Gorge on the Swift River in 1966. Photo credit: USFS



flooding damage throughout the river corridor, with the first storm causing saturated conditions and exacerbating flooding during the second storm. Above, road repair along Route 302 in Crawford Notch. Photo credit: Mark Dindorf.

Lake on the southeastern border of the Town of Carroll, and then passes through the towns of Hart's Location, Bartlett, and Conway before reaching the Maine border. In this 40-mile journey, the Saco River drops almost 1,500 feet in elevation, transforming from a small, steep, mountain stream to a broad, meandering river with outstretched floodplains in the lower elevations. The Swift River originates on Mount Kancamagus in Livermore at approximately 2,770 feet above sea level and flows through the forested landscapes of Livermore, Waterville Valley, and Albany until it converges with the Saco River in Conway approximately 26 miles later.

The resources of both river corridors are impacted, managed, and utilized in some way by the communities that surround them. The rivers have been impounded for recreation, confined for safe passage,

In recent decades, forested land, forested wetlands, and row crops have been steadily cleared and replaced by open fields and residential development. Though these land-use changes are slight, they indicate the larger trend of low-density urban sprawl and increased development in the region.

and used to dilute and transport pollutants. Water resources in the area are managed for drinking water and waste management. Historically, the Saco-Swift River Corridor and the surrounding landscape was home to a rich population of indigenous peoples, the Abenaki People. As settler communities grew in the 1600s, English settlers claimed ownership of Abenaki ancestral lands, and inflicted harm, violence, disease, and environmental degradation through the process of land dispossession. Over the subsequent centuries, rapid industrial expansion and development surrounded the Upper Saco River region, altering the river's landscape.

In recent decades, forested land,

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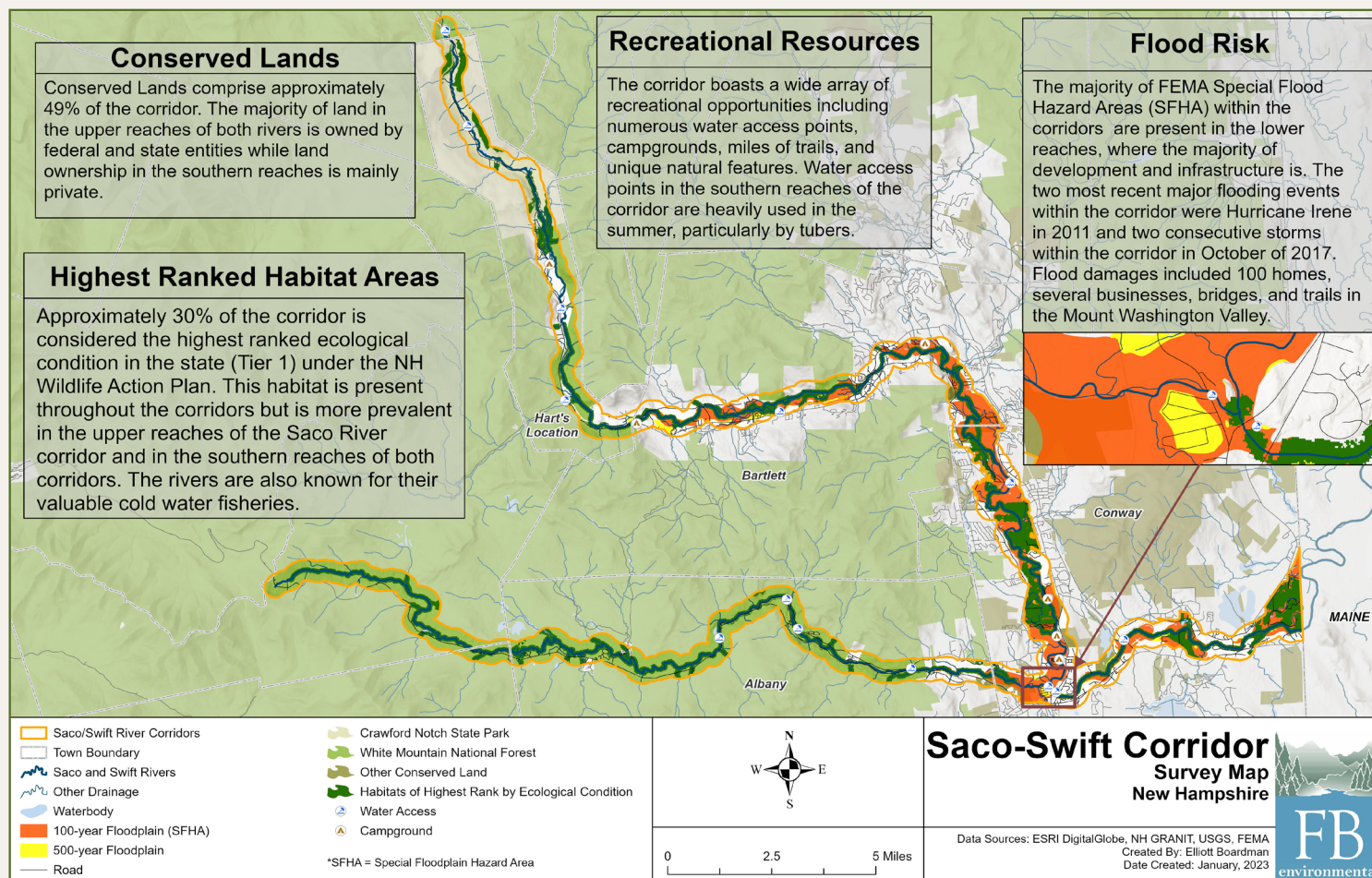
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Map of the Saco-Swift River Corridor, encompassing the river channel and the land area located within the distance of 1,320 feet (1/4 mile) of the normal high-water mark, or to the landward extent of the 100-year floodplain, whichever distance is greater. Credit: FBE.

forested wetlands, and row crops have been steadily cleared and replaced by open fields and residential development. Though these land-use changes are slight, they indicate the larger trend of low-density urban sprawl and increased development in the region. This highlights the importance of land-use planning and regulation within the river corridors in order to protect valuable riparian resources into the future.

Furthermore, impacts of climate change will continue to cause more frequent severe storms, resulting in flooding along the Saco-Swift Corridor. Severe flooding in developed areas, such as the portion of the Saco River in Conway, can mobilize contaminants from floodplains when infrastructure is damaged and severe erosion and sedimentation occur. Changing precipitation patterns are expected to cause greater

annual precipitation in the Northeast, as outlined in a recent National Climate Assessment completed by the U.S. Global Change Research Program. Despite greater precipitation amounts annually, shortened winters and increased winter precipitation falling as rain will likely result in earlier spring runoff and lower summertime peak flows, both of which affect the Saco and Swift corridors. Two of the most recent major flooding events to hit the Saco-Swift Corridor were Hurricane Irene and an October 2017 flooding event. High river levels caused by Hurricane Irene peaked in late August 2011, and resulted in damage to over 100 homes, several businesses, bridges, and trails in the Mt. Washington Valley. The flooding in October of 2017 was a result of a storm from October 24 to 27, causing saturated conditions, followed by Tropical Storm Phillipe (October 29 to 30).

THE CORRIDOR MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Saco-Swift River Corridor Management Plan is intended to help guide management of both rivers over the next 10 years from 2023-2033. During the development of the plan, starting in 2020, the Local Advisory Committee identified several management issues for the corridor, such as a lack of local regulations protecting the land area around the corridor and high recreational use (including lack of regulated public access for recreation). Building on these concerns, a completed assessment of natural, managed, cultural, and recreational resources identified other notable threats to the Saco-Swift River Corridor as flooding, development, riverbank erosion, water quality degradation, and recreational overuse. The land-use ordinance and regulation assessment



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Above: The Saco River originates at Saco Lake and then passes through the Towns of Hart's Location, Bartlett, and Conway on a 40-mile journey to the Maine border. Through Conway, much of the Saco is a meandering river with outstretched floodplains that help store and absorb flood waters, as shown here during high spring flows in May 2020."

also identified challenges for riverside communities, especially optimizing use of natural resource setbacks, low-impact development and green infrastructure, and regulatory protections of ground-water, aquifers, and all surface waters. Compounding the impacts of these threats, the population of the region has grown and spurred additional development and use of the region's natural resources.

Ultimately, the overall goal of the plan is to serve as a guidance document for corridor municipalities to balance the multiple uses of the Saco and Swift rivers. As part of a region that places high importance on its natural resources and its many values, including for economic and recreational purposes, ecosystem and habitat purposes, and utility services, the management and protection of the Saco-Swift Corridor must balance multiple uses while not compromising the quality of its unique resources. Specifically, key goals are to first, manage the resources of the Saco-Swift Corridor, with a particular focus to manage flooding, recreational resources, and natural habitats; and second, to protect the resources of the Saco-Swift Corridor, with a particular focus on protecting natural habitats, wa-

ter quality, in-stream flow, and building climate resiliency.

The completed draft of the Corridor Management Plan can currently be viewed at www.SacoSwift.org.



COMMUNITY SURVEY



The Local Advisory Committee encourages all members of the public to provide their input, including concerns

and why they value the river, by partaking in the community survey.

A final version of the plan is expected in late Spring 2023 after public input is incorporated.

To complete the community survey, please scan the QR code above or visit www.SacoSwift.org. The survey is open until May 18th, 2023.

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