

U.S. House backs York River's 'wild and scenic' designation

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The humble York River – an 11-mile waterway that wends its way through the southernmost corner of Maine – is moving into the national spotlight.

After a decade-long effort to protect its economic, scenic, historical and recreational value, the river is in the final stages of being designated as a Wild and Scenic Partnership River. The York River would be the first river in Maine to receive the partnership designation, which could lead to federal funding for habitat restoration or other projects.

Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-1st District, secured an amendment to the Protecting America's Wilderness and Public Land Act to add the York River to the National Park Service's Wild and Scenic List. The Wilderness Act is a landmark package of eight bipartisan bills that designates 1.5 million acres of public land as wilderness and incorporates more than 1,200 river miles into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Systems.

The Wilderness Act received bipartisan support in the House, passing on a 227-200 vote Friday.

Established by Congress in 1968, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Program aims to protect free-flowing rivers that are deemed to have “outstanding natural, cultural and recreational values.”

The Allagash Wilderness Waterway in far northern Maine is designated as a Wild and Scenic River, a different federal classification that comes with restrictions on development.

York River would be designated as a partnership river under the program, which opens the door to new sources of federal funding to support the health of the river and the economic prospects of the communities that rely on it. It does not put land under federal control, change existing land uses, force changes in local land use decisions, create new federal permits or regulations, prevent access or use of the river, or affect hunting and fishing laws.

The model emphasizes local management and control, and local leaders say the designation would allow groups to work together to protect the river.

The river and its 33-square-mile watershed flow through York, Kittery, South Berwick and Eliot, but most of it is in York. The river runs from York Pond past rolling hills, farm fields and salt marshes to York Harbor. It is used by commercial and recreational fishermen, including more than a dozen full-time lobstermen who keep their boats in York Harbor.

The salt marshes in the watershed serve as a nursery ground for nearly 30 species of fish. There are habitats for wading birds, migrating and nesting waterfowl, the endangered box turtle and the threatened harlequin duck.

“The York River watershed is notable for its historic structure and buildings, archaeological sites, scenic qualities, intact natural habitats, large forested areas and ecological resilience. It includes extensive salt marshes, rare plants and animals, drinking water supplies, undeveloped conservation lands, working waterfront, and clean water that supports a range of recreational activities and provides high-quality aquatic habitats,” the York River Study Committee wrote in its stewardship plan for the river.

The river and watershed are generally healthy, but face threats from population growth and development, invasive plant and animals species, increasing numbers of river users and sea level rise. Fishermen, recreational boaters, hunters and historical preservationists have been pushing for the designation for nearly a decade.



Pingree, who has supported the designation process since 2011, said the York River is a vital resource in one of the most populated areas of the state and should receive more resources as it faces increased pressure from development and environmental changes.

“We want to make sure we keep some of that wild area in southern Maine,” she said, noting the watershed is an important source of drinking water and a nursery ground for 30 species of fish that are vital to the Gulf of Maine ecosystem.

Talk of the designation as a Partnership Wild and Scenic River began in 2009 when the Friends of York River, a group of watershed residents, wanted to determine if it would be an effective way to recognize and protect the river and its resources. The group garnered widespread support locally and caught the attention of Pingree, who first introduced legislation in 2011 to fund a study by local stakeholders to determine the impact of the “wild and scenic” designation.

That bill as signed by former President Barack Obama in 2014, and in 2017 the York River Study Committee recommended the river receive the designation. York, Eliot, Kittery and South Berwick endorsed moving forward with the designation in 2018.

The York River Watershed Stewardship Plan was approved by the York River Study Committee in July 2018. The plan is an advisory document that outlines recommendations aimed at preserving and enhancing the historic resources, ecology, wildlife, water quality, working waterfront, scenic qualities and cultural resources.

In February 2019, Pingree introduced a bill to designate the York River in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system with Rep. Jared Golden, D-2nd District, as a co-sponsor. Last December, Sens. Angus King and Susan Collins introduced legislation in the Senate to designate the York River as “wild and scenic.”

If included in the program, the York River could receive annual allotments of federal funds to conduct studies, school and community outreach, and other projects.

Pingree said those federal resources are critical to protect the river because communities are often stressed for resources and don’t have funding for studies and projects.

“This opens up some of those opportunities,” she said.

Pingree anticipates that the Wilderness Act will be supported in the Senate and signed into law by President Biden.

“We’re really excited. This is the best opportunity to move this forward and get it to the president’s desk,” she said.

Note: This article was updated March 1 to clarify that the Allagash Wilderness Waterway is designated as a Wild and Scenic River, although not part of the partnership program.

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