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York River designated as ‘Wild and Scenic’

At long last, Congress voted to designate York River into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. The designation authorization was included in the ‘omnibus’ government spending bill approved by Congress and sent to President Biden on December 23.

From 2015 to 2018, a local study committee comprised of town-appointed members from York, Kittery, Eliot, and South Berwick evaluated the river for designation into the national program and created a river management plan. All four communities voted in support of Wild and Scenic river designation and the companion [York River Watershed Stewardship Plan](#) in late 2018. Designation bills were first introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Congresswoman Pingree in February 2019 and in the U.S. Senate by Senator King and Senator Collins in December 2020.

“From the start, we knew York River was worthy of protection, and we sought to build upon the care shown for the river by past and current river users,” said study committee member Karen Arsenault. Arsenault, a York resident, was part of the small group that first explored the possibility of river designation beginning in 2009. “It’s been four years since completing our local study that confirmed that the river was a great candidate for Wild and Scenic designation, so we are heartened to see this finally come to fruition,” added Arsenault.

York River joins the national program as a Partnership Wild and Scenic River, making it one of just eighteen designated rivers that follow this model. Partnership rivers benefit from financial and technical assistance from the National Park Service but are not managed by the federal agency. The partnership principles of local governance and limited federal role are codified in the newly authorized legislation.

Study committee chair Judy Spiller of Kittery indicated, “This is a wonderful opportunity to give communities the boost they need to sustain the river into the future. When there are so many competing priorities, our river resources don’t always get the attention they deserve. This designation will enable a long-term watershed approach to local river stewardship.”

Over the next year, York River watershed communities will form a Stewardship Committee to facilitate implementation of the stewardship plan, engage citizens, and coordinate with partner groups. The committee will decide how annual funding from the National Park Service Wild and Scenic Rivers Program is used for activities and projects that help protect the qualities that earned the river its Wild and Scenic status.

Information about the York River Wild and Scenic Study is available on YorkRiverMaine.org