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BENTON: Warden ready for the run

BY LARRY GRARD

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DIFFERENT SIDES: Benton alewife warden Rick Lawrence, left, and abutting landowner Albert Curtis discuss access beside a Central Maine Power corridor along Outer Clinton Avenue that leads to the Sebasticook River where alewife fishing will occur.

BENTON -- The town's first alewife warden says he is no expert on harvesting fish.

But Rick Lawrence does have a "keen interest" in the first spring migration of the sea-run species up the Sebasticook River to Benton in 200 years.

"I'll make sure the harvest goes smoothly," Lawrence said last week, as he guided three members of the Alewife Harvesters of Maine along the Sebasticook River -- next year's fishing grounds.

"I'll monitor the harvest and make reports to both the town and the Department of Marine Resources. I'll handle any issues, such as trespassers or poachers," he said.

And he'll work at a rate that would please most towns: for free.

Most of Lawrence's job will begin any day now, as soon as the fish run begins. He'll monitor Jefferson resident Ron Weeks and his crew as they net the prized fish, beginning Monday, near the Benton dam.

Voters agreed to spend about \$17,000 in tax dollars to buy 2 1/2 acres of land along the river, a mile below the dam, and to build an access road leading to the harvest spot.

"It's reasserting Benton's historical right to harvest the fish," Lawrence said of the contract.

Just for this year, the town will conduct the fish harvest nearer the dam, by permission of dam owner Essex Hydro.

There's nothing to stop the herring species from reaching Webber Pond in Vassalboro or, beyond Benton, Sebasticook Lake in Newport now that Edwards Dam has been torn down in Augusta and Fort Halifax Dam is gone from Winslow. Fish ladders installed within recent years at the Benton and Burnham dams make the runs that far upriver possible.

The removal of Edwards Dam by itself has permitted the fish to make their way up the Kennebec and Seven Mile Stream to Webber Pond.

Benton residents recently agreed to allow Lawrence to negotiate the harvest.

Benton's share of the harvest could range from \$5,000 to \$20,000, depending on the source of the estimates.

Weeks has been awarded the contract to harvest the fish here, as well as at Vassalboro's Webber Pond and at Jefferson's Dyer Long Pond. As his contracts stipulate, he must return a third of his earnings to the three towns.

Lawrence has served on the board of Maine Rivers for six years. As he spoke, he gestured toward a large rock in the middle of the Sebasticook.

"That's what makes this a great spot for harvesting," he said. "They'll be able to construct the weir there, to draw the fish toward the shore for harvesting."

Just before the 2 million to 3 million alewives make their run up the river, Weeks and his employees will set up for the harvest. Last year, Weeks said, he took in 800 to 1,000 bushels of alewives from the waters in Vassalboro and Jefferson. As a lobsterman, Weeks uses some alewives for his own bait, but he sells most of his catch for \$20 to 25 per bushel.

All under Lawrence's watchful eye.

"Ron has a proven record for his honesty," Lawrence said, "and the DMR is confident in him, too."

Weeks and his associates Jeff Pierce and Zeb Woodbury say they're eager for the run, which is imminent and will require fast action. The Sebasticook represents a swifter waterway than the ponds in Vassalboro and Jefferson.

"We've had a great spring," Pierce said, "and the water's high enough so they can get over some of those watershed obstructions."

By law, the harvesters must leave two-thirds of the river open, and there is a three-day closure per week. Harvesters can only harvest fish four days a week in order to preserve fish populations.

Weeks expects a bigger catch than in Vassalboro or Jefferson.

"But the way the price of lobsters is going," he said, "it might be a lower scale for the bait."

The men looked down at the rocky shoreline and spotted the remains of snails and clams.

"It's a real healthy river," Weeks said.

Alewives have been a great asset to their waterways.

"They eat plankton, which reduces the phosphorus, and deposit it in the ocean, which can handle it better," Woodbury said.

Alewives also provide food for other river-dependent species, as well as species in the Gulf of Maine.

Pierce said that just 18 towns of the 41 that have fishing rights to alewives take advantage of them, due to concerns regarding conservation of the fish.

The eight-week harvest employs about 400 people statewide and brings \$6 million into Maine, Pierce said.

Lawrence, 65, became the town's first alewife warden by a vote of residents in March. Next year, with the land acquisition behind him, Lawrence expects his duties as alewife warden will be confined to the spring run.

He expressed a passion for the renewed run of the alewives.

"It's the history," Lawrence said. "This little town at one time had this marvelous resource, and this resource has been returned to us. We have this abundance."

A former teacher, farmer and member of the town's Board of Selectmen, Lawrence recently became the first administrative assistant in the neighboring town of Albion.

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