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Pristine Fisheries Habitat to be Permanently Conserved: Gulf Hugas – W. Branch Pleasant River Project

by Karin R. Tilberg, FSM Deputy Executive Director

For many of us, the act of catching a brook trout on a fly is akin to a spiritual experience. Fishing is a unique connection to a different, magical world filled with beautiful and powerful creatures that are normally hidden from us. Even in the middle of winter I find my thoughts frequently drifting to beloved fishing memories and imagine what new adventures are ahead.

One special place for fishing (and paddling) is the Gulf Hugas – Silver Lake region of the West Branch of the Pleasant River, east of Greenville. This is a favorite haunt for many. The waters here are fed by a network of clear-running, cold-water streams that arise in the surrounding mountains. This is prime habitat for brook trout that lay their eggs in streams and rivers with gravelly bottoms and that require cold, clean,



flowing waters to thrive. The river also provides ideal conditions for Atlantic salmon to spawn and for their young to grow. The silver maple flood plains that line the river's banks provide shade in the summer, keeping the water cool and well-oxygenated, conditions trout and salmon require.

The West Branch of the Pleasant River is an important component of a larger watershed. It joins the East Branch and flows into the Piscataquis River, which flows into the Penobscot River and then on to the Atlantic Ocean. The Penobscot River Restoration project has provided the opportunity for Atlantic salmon and other sea-run fish to access these spawning grounds. Early indications are that Atlantic salmon are finding superb spawning habitat in the West Branch of the Pleasant River.

The Forest Society of Maine, working with two landowners (Pine State Timberlands and Conservation Forestry, LLC), the state, and conservation partners, is spearheading an effort to conserve nearly 18,000 acres around the West Branch of the Pleasant River and Silver Lake. If fundraising succeeds and the project closes, which has a deadline of later this year, 95% of the West Branch of the Pleasant River will be permanently conserved along with the forests and wetlands around it. Brook trout, Atlantic salmon, and a long list of other fish and wildlife will benefit, and the woods and waters will be available for generations to come, to enjoy as I do.

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