

Epsom

A river doesn't run through it

Town, state ponder Suncook's new path

By WALTER ALARKON
Monitor staff

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The Suncook River in Epsom hasn't been the same since last month's floods: Now, it runs through farm fields and a sand pit, and a riverfront restaurant overlooks a dry river-bed. And anglers worry whether their potential catches can survive the brown river water, muddied by dirt the river dislodged.

Those affected by the shift are waiting for the state to decide on a plan. Most want the river moved back. State scientists have been trying to figure out what happened and will present their findings to the town tomorrow. But they caution that moving the river back would be expensive, if not impossible.

"You have to understand that it's such a unique thing from a societal perspective," said David Wunsch, chief of the New Hampshire Geological Survey. "Geologically, this happens all the time, it just doesn't happen in a lifetime. It's kind of like when the Old Man fell down. If it happens during your lifetime, you don't know what to do about it."

The Suncook River starts in Alton and Gilmanton and runs southwest to the Merrimack River in Allenstown. Before it changed course, a large stream flowed around the northwest side of an island, while a smaller stream flowed around the southeast side. On May 16, as heavy rains filled the river, the entire river began flowing by the island's southeast side.

State river coordinator Steve Couture said cost will largely determine what's to be done to the Suncook. He said relocating the river would require federal funds; the Army Corps of Engineers would help design such a venture. The state hasn't given any cost estimates.

When a river changes course, it's typically due to flooding and erosion, said Eric Orff, a state wildlife biologist who lives along the river in Epsom. As river waters rise during floods, they can overcome eroded weak points in the land. Orff said rivers shift all the time, but not to the degree the Suncook did last month, when it moved up to half a mile. Maps of Epsom dating back to the 19th century show that the river was fairly stable until recently, Wunsch said.

While such shifts are a rarity, they do happen. In 1993, the Mojave River in Los Angeles moved 50 yards from its normal course during heavy rains, flooding six homes. Also in

River shifted in the 1800s after boundaries were set. And in New Orleans, long before Hurricane Katrina hit, engineers debated how to protect the city from flooding because of the shifting Mississippi.

Orff said Epsom was lucky the Suncook didn't damage more properties. He believes that the river shifted when its waters overcame a sand and gravel pit.

The pit's owners, the Cutter family, said they don't even know what they have anymore. Much of their land - plus the gravel and sand that was on it - has been washed away by the river.

"The whole terrain has changed, the access has changed, and the value of prop for sand and gravel has changed," said Bob Gerseny, who manages the trust the pit was placed in. "It has become complicated."

Stewart Yeaton, Epsom's fire chief, and his brother Bill run a dairy farm. Their cornfields now house a river, and Yeaton worries the soaked fields might not produce enough feed for his livestock. He has talked to construction companies about rerouting the part of the river on his land, but he's waiting to hear from the state first.

"I'd just like to find out what their plans are so we can do something, one way or another," he said.

The owner of the Concord Elks Lodge in Epsom, Bob Griggs, wants it moved back for aesthetic reasons. His restaurant near Route 28 had a porch above the river, where patrons could watch the water run over a dam. The restaurant was a lumber mill, and the water running through the dam used to power it. Griggs's porch now looks over an empty riverbed and dry dam.

"I don't know of any other piece of land like it in the country," Griggs said. "It's a shame to see that go."

Griggs also owns the land that had been across the river from the restaurant. It used to be a 112-acre island with a single cottage, accessible only by a footbridge. Griggs had plans for a larger bridge that would let him drive to the island; last year, he bought one for about \$2,000. With no more river to cross, he's not sure what he'll do with it.

The sand and earth dislodged by the river's move has muddied the water and left silt around downstream houses. Tom Baumeister had to dig out up to four feet of silt around his Pembroke house.

Baumeister has lived there for 29 years, and he often fished from his deck. He worries many species won't survive in the brown water. He wants the river put back where it was, and he has called on environmentalists and fishermen to get the state to clean up the Suncook.

"This river needs them right now," he said.

Orff, of Fish and Game, said he's most worried about the mussels. About 1,100 were found in the Suncook's former riverbeds. He also said his department has received reports of dead bass.

But, like other officials still trying to grasp the Suncook's shift, Orff cautioned against jumping to any conclusions.

"It's way too early to actually have a sense of what impact it has had or will occur," he said.

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