

Suncook changed course during floods

Wandering river's future unclear

By **CHELSEA CONABOY**
Monitor staff

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BRIAN LEHMANN / Monitor staff

State and federal wildlife officials collect brook floater mussels from the nearly drained riverbed of the Suncook River in Epsom yesterday. The mussels are on the state endangered species list and will be kept in a fishery in Nashua before being returned upstream in the Suncook. About one mile of the river's length was diverted after last week's flooding.

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The state has never dealt with a situation like the one in Epsom, where the Suncook River shifted hundreds of meters during last week's flood, skirting two dams, creating about a mile of new river through a sand pit and leaving a similar length of dry riverbed. Officials at a selectmen's meeting last night said it will take some time to figure out what to do with the river now.

"It's new territory for all, not just for this town, but all at the state level," said Steve Couture, rivers coordinator for the Department of Environmental Services.

But some residents said they can't afford to wait for something to be done.

Camping season started last weekend at the Epsom Valley Campground on Route 28, upstream from where the river breached its banks. Owner Peter Arvanitis has been digging the site out from feet of sand deposited by the flooded river. But he's also wondering what will happen when the effects of the flood are over and the water levels drop again.

In the old river channel, two dams held the water back, making it perfect for canoeing and fishing upstream. The river's new route skirts those dams. Without them, he's worried the river will drain to just a trickle and his business will be lost. He said he thinks the economic loss to his family and others should be a factor in the decision made by the town and the state.

Fire Chief Stewart Yeaton said the river plowed through its banks last Tuesday morning, just upstream from where it used to split and run around Bear Island.

The water carved through peat bogs and tore away a corner of a sand excavation pit. Tire tracks around the rim of the pit now stop at the edge of a cliff that drops at least 20 feet to the murky water below.

The relocation wasn't necessarily a surprise to Couture. Rivers don't like sharp directional changes and, in the old channel, the Suncook turned almost 180 degrees just north of the

sandpit. A relatively straight line through the pit was "really where the river wanted to go."

He said the town and the state need to decide on one of two options: Move the river back, or leave it where it is. "There's going to be funding limitations on both sides," he said.

A declaration of federal disaster would make some money available. But, Couture said, the state and the town will likely have to find matching grant money elsewhere. In the meantime, he wants to meet with town officials and talk about the options. Couture said he doesn't yet have an opinion on which would be best.

If officials leave the river where it is, Couture said, the river will take a while to stabilize and find its natural channel. But that won't happen in one generation's time, he added. If the river is moved back to its earlier route, it could again quickly plow through its bank.

During a break, Bob Griggs looked at the map and said he could fix the problem in a week with two bulldozers and a pile of sand.

Couture said that wouldn't work. "The river could fix itself again in less (time) than that."

Griggs owns the Old Mill building, a mobile home park abutting the river and what was the 112-acre Bear Island. He said, if he had his way, the paperwork would be bypassed and the river put back where it was. But, he said, "it's out of my hands."

If the river is left where it is, Tom Baumeister said his property downstream in Pembroke will be unusable. He said he's been shoveling sand from his yard for three days, and he worries that more will find its way from the sandpit to his land every time it rains.

"I hope they have a buyout plan for some of us," he said. "It's an impossible situation."

Couture planned to meet with the Epsom Conservation Commission and again with the selectmen in two weeks. Selectman Bob McKechnie agreed to walk Baumeister's property this week to see the damage firsthand.

The crowd applauded the work of Yeaton and other emergency responders and volunteers for handling the river relocation and the other 62 emergency calls they received during the flood efficiently and without loss of life.

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