

\$25 million raised to begin ambitious Penobscot River Restoration Project

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Photos courtesy Joe Dana, Penobscot Indian Nation -- The Penobscot Indian Nation and its public and private partners have raised \$25 million for the first phase of the Penobscot River Restoration Project, an unprecedented collaborative effort between tribal, federal, and state governments, industry, and conservation groups, working to restore self sustaining populations of native migratory fish while fulfilling the need for hydro electric power generation.

INDIAN ISLAND, Maine - The Penobscot Indian Nation and its public and private partners have raised \$25 million for the first phase of the Penobscot River Restoration Project, an unprecedented collaborative effort between tribal, federal, and state governments, industry, and conservation groups, working to restore self sustaining populations of native migratory fish while fulfilling the need for hydro electric power generation.

The Penobscot River is the second largest river system in the northeast. The river and its tributaries and brooks are the arteries, veins and capillaries of an 8,570-square-mile watershed - the eastern third of the state of Maine.

From time immemorial until the 1800s, the river was a highway for Atlantic salmon - dramatic wild creatures of muscle and instinct that swam across the ocean to the coast of Greenland where they grew to adulthood, then navigated back to spawn in the clear water and gravel

bottoms of the very same streams and brooks where they were born.

The Penobscot Indians traveled the river and its tributaries in birch bark canoes, following the paths of the salmon and other migratory fish that came and went with the seasons.

Although the Atlantic salmon and other species were reduced to near extinction by the dams, the American fishing industry, and pollution from the paper mills and towns that sprouted along the river's banks, water quality in the river had improved greatly years since the 1977 amendments to the Clean Water Act were passed. Now with plans to remove the dams closest to the ocean and to install fish passages upstream, the Atlantic salmon and other beautiful dwellers of the deep may soon have a chance to come home.

For the Penobscot people, the restoration of the river is meaningful beyond expression.

"It's difficult to describe in words what that means to the tribe," said John Banks, director of the nation's Department of Natural Resources.

"You often hear people talk about we are the river, the river is us. It defines us as a tribe, it defines who we are, where we came from, and many of our cultural traditions are tied to the river and its resources. We've evolved as a riverine tribe for 10,000 years here. The river has provide all of our needs - physically, culturally, spiritually and allowed us to prosper for thousands of years," Banks said.

The Nature Conservancy has called the Penobscot River Restoration Project "perhaps the most important freshwater restoration project under way in North America."

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust announced in November that it had met its first private campaign milestone by raising \$10 million toward the approximately \$25 million purchase price of three hydropower dams at the core of the restoration project.

"Tremendous private commitment has helped inspire federal investment in the future of the Penobscot River for Maine and the nation," said Laura Rose Day, the executive director of the trust, a nonprofit organization that holds an option to purchase the dams.

Just a month later, the trust announced the project would receive a \$10 million appropriation from the federal government to be directed through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. With approximately \$5 million previously raised, the project can move forward toward its first phase - the purchase of Veazie, Great Works, and Howland dams.

Veazie and Great Works, the two dams closest to the ocean, will be removed. At Howland, a fish bypass will be built. When the project is fully implemented, native fisheries will be restored in nearly 1,000 miles of key habitat that will open up for Atlantic salmon, American shad, shortnose sturgeon, and several other species of migratory fish.

The project had its beginnings in the 1990s deregulation of the electric industry when the PPL Corporation purchased the dams and hydro electric generation plants. The company, the tribe, the Interior Department, the state and conservation groups began to explore a comprehensive vision for hydropower re-licensing, migratory fish passages, and ecological restoration of the river.

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust was formed in 2004 as a nonprofit organization for the purpose of implementing the restoration project, and includes representation from all the partners. In addition to the Penobscot Indian Nation, federal, and state governments, the trust partners include American Rivers, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Maine Audubon, Natural Resources Council of Maine, The Nature Conservancy, and Trout Unlimited.

The restoration will not only benefit the fish and river's ecology, but, in this era of diminishing fossil fuels and the need for green energy, will continue to provide clean hydroelectric power.

As part of the restoration agreement, PPL Corporation can increase electricity generation at six other existing dams, which means the electric company will maintain its current levels of generation. The initial phase of energy increase were approved and implemented in 2006.

The decommissioning and removal of a dam is as complex as creating and licensing one. The trust and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission have held a series of scoping sessions - meetings where public comments are gathered for the record and considered. The project will require environmental impact studies as well as various state and federal permitting.

Banks said he hopes the actual dam removal will begin within two years. The project will have a tremendous impact, Banks said.

"For the Penobscot people, it will mean the ability to exercise our sustenance fishing rights, but this is about much more than salmon. There's the human dimensions of it. There are fishermen, paddlers, boaters, hikers and the communities along the edge of the river - who will benefit from the restored resources of the river," Banks said.