

Dam removal plan progresses

Projects would reopen parts of Penobscot River to sea-run fish



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The DEP issued draft permits to remove the Veazie dam. [Buy Photo](#)

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AUGUSTA, Maine — The historic plan to remove or bypass three large dams in the Penobscot River is inching closer to reality now that state and federal regulators have begun signing off on aspects of the river restoration project.

Last week, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved the **Penobscot River Restoration** Trust's request to decommission and remove the Veazie dam and Great Works dams as well as decommission and bypass the Howland dam.

FERC approval was a critical first step in the regulatory process for proposed projects that, by the time they are completed in 2013 or 2014, will reopen hundreds of miles of rivers and streams to Atlantic salmon and other migratory fish.

Click here for a graphic: [The Penobscot River Restoration Project](#)

The Maine Department of Environmental Protection followed suit this week, opening a public comment period on the department's draft decision approving the trust's plans for the Veazie and Howland dams. The department is expected to release a draft approval of the Great Works project sometime this week.

Laura Rose Day, executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, said Tuesday she frequently is asked when the projects will begin. Notwithstanding any last-minute permitting problems or other hiccups, work on decommissioning and removing the Great Works dam should commence next summer, Day said.

“I think people feel really excited and hopeful about the river being restored,” Day said.

It has been roughly seven years since a broad coalition including environmental groups, government agencies, the Penobscot Nation and the power industry unveiled their ambitious plan to restore a more natural flow to the Penobscot.

The plan calls for dismantling the Veazie and Great Works dams — the first manmade barriers that sea-run fish encounter in the Penobscot — as well as decommissioning and building a state-of-the-art fish passage around the Howland dam.

In return, power company PPL Corp. would be paid \$25 million for the three dams and granted authorization to offset the losses by increasing power generation at six other hydroelectric facilities.

The result, according to the parties, is an internationally precedent-setting compromise that reopens nearly 1,000 miles of habitat for salmon, shad, alewives and other sea-run fish without reducing net hydroelectric production.

“If this project happens, it will be the biggest change on the Penobscot River in 150 years,” said Dana Murch, who oversees dam and hydropower projects for the DEP.

In addition to DEP and FERC permits, the trust must also receive permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before any work can begin. Day said she hopes the Army Corps permits will be approved shortly now that FERC has completed its environmental assessment and application review.

Those permits will be null and void, however, if the trust does not come up with the estimated \$25 million to \$30 million it will take to physically remove and bypass the three dams. The trust has already received more than \$6 million in federal stimulus money to deconstruct the Great Works dam and is hoping for a mix of public and private funds to cover the rest, Day said.

Removing the Great Works and Veazie dams will be no easy feat, as evidenced by the exhaustive mitigation and monitoring requirements included in both the FERC and DEP permits.

Each project is expected to take at least a year to complete as crews work to gradually deconstruct the dams without harming the populations of federally protected salmon and shortnose sturgeon that are already in the river.

More than 1,000 Atlantic salmon have returned to the Penobscot to spawn so far this spring, according to tallies kept by the state and federal biologists that manage the fish trip at the Veazie dam.

The concrete Veazie dam, which dates back roughly a century, measures 900 feet long and 25 feet high, according to documents filed with FERC. The trust also will have to remove an earlier, now-submerged dam just upstream from the current Veazie dam that biologists fear could prevent fish from migrating once the water level drops.

Once the Veazie and Great Works dams are removed, the Milford dam visible from downtown Old Town will be the first impediment to upstream passage to fish. In a related

project, crews will build a new fish lift and trap at Milford, thereby allowing biologists to collect adult fish for the Atlantic salmon hatchery run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Additionally, the trust will have to ensure that work does not allow invasive species to expand in the area and will have to monitor for archaeological sites.

Some sportsmen's organizations and upriver towns have expressed concerns that removing the two dams and building a bypass at Howland could allow invasive northern pike to infiltrate upper tributaries. The fear is that pike, which are voracious eaters that can grow to several feet in length, will harm landlocked salmon and brook trout fisheries.

But FERC concluded in the agency's environmental assessment that adding a trap-and-sort system at Howland, as proposed by some project critics, could delay salmon migration and lead to additional injuries. In addition, the trust would have to build a separate eel passage facility.

"Thus, [the assessment] concludes that the benefits of unrestricted fish passage for migratory fishes through the project area outweigh the potential risks associated with northern pike passage," FERC wrote last week.

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