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Howland starts tannery cleanup

Federal funds to aid rehabilitation of site

By Nick Sambides Jr.

HOWLAND, Maine — A Winterport general contractor is clearing 3 acres at the former Howland Tannery as a first step crucial to rehabilitating the long-abandoned site, Town Manager Jane Jones said Wednesday.

In the first significant cleanup work on the site since the tannery closed in 1971, Dirt Diggers Inc. is cutting and chipping all tree trunks, branches, shrubs and other wood growth on the site. Tree stumps will be left alone for fear of upsetting contaminated soil. Work began Friday, Jones said.

The company is being paid about \$4,800 from a \$600,000 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grant that was awarded to the town in May 2009. The money, using federal stimulus funds, will pay for the removal of contaminants left on three shoreline spots, the most challenging aspect of the town-owned site's cleanup, Jones said.

“Our mission is to spend that money as responsibly and efficiently as we can to get as far into the cleanup effort as we can,” Jones said. “We know that when the \$600,000 is gone, we are done until we get another source of money.”

Once home to the town's largest employer, the tannery site has loomed large in more recent revitalization plans that proponents hope to realize by 2012.

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust plans to build a fish bypass near the tannery site, green some tannery land, and dig a channel for the bypass as part of a project opening nearly 1,000 miles of habitat to Atlantic salmon, alewives and other sea-run fish now blocked from migrating upriver.

The trust plans to buy three other dams along the river.

The town portion of the cleanup, which is funded by the grant, will not include razing any buildings on the site. A feasibility study on the cleanup indicated that removing all buildings and contaminants would cost about \$4 million, Jones has said.

As Jones searches for more federal and state funds to remove the buildings on the town-owned portions of the site, a vision committee is plotting the land's future.

A draft report envisioning a final use of the land will be released to the Board of Selectmen on March 29, the same day selectmen hope to seek bids from contractors

willing to clean the three contaminated shoreline spots and do other work, Jones said. Review and opening of bids will come later.

Eaton-Peabody, a Bangor law firm, is writing the draft report, thanks to a \$3,500 donation from the restoration trust, for which Jones said she is grateful.

“That [report] is going to go a long way toward getting us the seed money to take the next step,” Jones said. “You have to have a focused plan to be competitive in the grant process. There are a lot of needy communities out there competing for the same grant money.”

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