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OUR VIEWS

Largest fish recovery project in the East gets powered up

The Penobscot River project is a model
for collaborative negotiations.

One of the largest and most innovative river-restoration projects in American history took a significant step forward last week by, oddly enough, increasing power generation at a dam on the Penobscot River.

Dams on this, New England's second-largest river system, were in large part responsible for decimating the astounding runs of salmon and other sea-run fish that greeted the colonists. So how can increasing hydropower production be key to restoring the river?

The answer is that when creative people seek solutions instead of defending principles, they can accomplish the implausible.

While power production at the Stillwater Dam in Old Town, along with dams in West Enfield and Medway, will increase, a coalition of six conservation groups and the Penobscot Nation intends to tear down the Veazie and Great Works dams and bypass a third.

The Penobscot the last stronghold of a legendary fish now facing extirpation

in the rest of the Maine. The dam removals and fish passages will fully restore all of the historic habitat for salmon, shad, river herring, striped bass, smelt, tomcod and sturgeon.

It won't be cheap: The partners have raised just one-third of the \$25 million needed to buy the two dams and add fish passage to the third. The total project cost is estimated at \$60 million.

But as the remarkable resurgence of the Kennebec River shows, if we remove dams, the fish will come home.

It's critical to recognize that the agreement was possible only because it made economic sense for PPL, the utility that owns the dams, and because federal and state agencies have contributed funding and expertise.

While it will take determination and many tens of millions of dollars before its full fruits are realized, all Mainers should thank those who were able to imagine a solution that honors the social, cultural and economic value of this priceless natural asset.