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The soon-to-be-removed Great Works Dam on the Penobscot River in Old Town is adjacent to the Old Town Fuel & Fiber facility, seen on left last month.

Old Town dam removal to begin

Demolition to be first 'real action' in Penobscot fishery restoration

BY NICK MCCREA *BDN 6/9-10/12*
BDN STAFF

OLD TOWN — When the demolition of the Great Works dam starts Monday, it will be the first visible step in a 13-year effort to open nearly 1,000 miles of habitat to 11 species of sea-run fish that haven't had open, easy access to sections of the Penobscot River for two centuries.

Laura Rose Day, executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, a nonprofit organization formed to bring the river reopening to its fruition, said the Great Works dam removal will be the first "real action" in what has become one of the largest fishery restoration projects in the history of the nation and a global model for similar restoration projects.

The Great Works dam stretches across

the Penobscot from Bradley to Old Town. The Veazie dam also is slated for removal in 2013 and 2014, the Milford dam will get a new fish lift and a fish bypass will be built at the Howland dam.

"This project will give sea-run fisheries a good chance of recovery," Day said of the dam removal efforts.

Dams, overfishing and pollution have drastically cut the number of sea-run fish that make it north of Bangor in the Penobscot. Before humans began altering the river, between 75,000 and 100,000 Atlantic salmon traveled past Bangor on their annual runs, according to the restoration

trust's deputy director, George Aponte Clarke. Today, only about 1,300 make it that far. Between 14 million and 20 million river herring made it upriver in the past, while fewer than 1,000 make it today.

"Salmon are known for being tenacious," Day said. "They can pass over multiple barriers, but not as many as we have now."

After the demolition of the dams in Old Town and Veazie and the installation of the bypass in Howland, Clarke said the trust estimates that 4 million to 6 million shad and 10,000-12,000 Atlantic salmon will be able to travel freely upriver. Other species will see gains as well, he said.

Day said the dam removals will open up new recreational and economic development opportunities for communities on the river.

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The city of Old Town, in conjunction with Old Town Canoe, the University of Maine and Black Bear Inn, started the Stay and Play program in 2010. Stay and Play features guided "Paddle Adventures," fishing trips and wildlife expeditions "designed to boost awareness and eco-tourism opportunities in the Old Town area," according to Old Town Canoe spokesman Lloyd Hall.

He said opening the river will bring more expedition options and much larger runs of fish and also boost opportunities for this and other programs in Old Town.

Gov. Paul LePage chided the dam removal plans during a press event Wednesday at which he announced the first listing of

Maine's "business-friendly" communities.

"I think it's irresponsible for our country to be taking out hydro dams," LePage said. "I think we need to put more in."

LePage said it was "absolutely appalling" that lawmakers this spring couldn't come to an agreement on a bill that sought to lift a 100-megawatt cap for qualifying hydropower and other forms of energy generation, such as fuel cells and tidal generation.

"They should be ashamed," he said.

The dam removals will not reduce energy production on the Penobscot, according to the trust. Black Bear Hydro Partners LLC, the owner of the dams, received approval in September 2011 to upgrade the Stillwater and Orono dams to eliminate the energy production gap left by the demolition of the Great Works and Veazie dams.

The company estimates the upgrades will boost the energy capacity of the Orono dam from 2.78 to 6.52 megawatts and the Stillwater dam from 1.95 to 4.18 megawatts.

The complex river restoration deal got its start in 1999, after Pennsylvania-based PPL Corp. purchased dams along the Penobscot River. The company soon started having discussions with the state, Penobscot Indian Nation, U.S. Department of the Interior and several Maine conservation groups to hash out solutions to issues involving hydro power relicensing, migratory fish passage and restoration of the river.

That collaboration laid early groundwork for the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, and by 2004, the parties had a plan — the Lower Penobscot River Multi-Party Settlement Agreement.

Historically, power companies and conservation groups

have been at odds over ecological and hydroelectric issues, but this project found a balance, Day said.

Under the 2004 agreement, PPL would sell six dams in Millford, Orono, Stillwater, Ellsworth, Medway and West Enfield to Black Bear Hydro, and the restoration trust would later purchase the Veazie, Great Works and Howland dams.

Those deals came to fruition. In 2009, PPL sold the six dams and their associated hydropower assets to Black Bear Hydro for \$31 million. The next year, the trust bought the dams in Veazie, Old Town and Howland for \$24 million with plans to demolish the Veazie and Old Town dams and build a fish bypass in Howland.

The full picture will begin to come together with Monday's demolition of the Great Works dam, which stretches 1,000 feet across the Penobscot River from

Old Town to Bradley. Demolition is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m., with officials including U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Penobscot Indian Nation Tribal Chief Kirk Francis scheduled to give speeches.

The demolition of the first portion of the dam is set to start around 10:30 a.m.

Ellsworth-based R.F. Jordan & Sons Construction Inc. will take down the dam piece by piece until the project is completed in November, said Jeffrey Hallett, project manager at R.F. Jordan.

The company works mostly on dams, retaining walls and sea walls.

Hallett said an access road built across the river on the downstream side of the dam will allow heavy equipment to reach parts of the dam. An excavator with a hoe ram — essentially a large jackhammer — will start chipping away con-

crete sections of the dam. The rubble will be hauled off site in dump trucks.

The dam removal contract is for \$3.5 million, paid for by the trust.

"The greatest challenge is trying to control the water," Hallett said. "We are using the powerhouse to control the flow of the water."

The water level should be lower during the summer and the powerhouse should be able to release enough water to keep the water level behind the dam low enough to allow crews to work, Hallett said.

The Penobscot Indian Nation will host a community luncheon and celebration starting at 11:30 a.m. Monday at Sockalexis Hall on Indian Island. The celebration will include cultural exhibits, speakers, museum displays and canoe trips on the river.

BDN writer Matt Stone contributed to this report.