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PENOBSCOT POWER

A project former Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton called “perhaps the most significant step to restore the Atlantic salmon in the past century,” aims to restore fish habitat in New England’s second largest watershed without significantly reducing hydro-electric power generation.

With the president and other leaders pushing for more renewable power amid fears of electricity shortages and growing concern about climate change, maintaining, or even increasing, hydro power production makes good sense.

The innovative project on the Penobscot River, which involves the dams’ owner, PPL Corp., conservation groups, the Penobscot Nation and federal and state agencies, will remove two dams and modify a third while increasing output at three others on the waterway. As a result, hydro power generation on the river will remain nearly the same while fish passage and the accompanying opportunities for recreational angling and boating will be vastly increased.

The river, the largest freshwater source for the Gulf of Maine, is an important source of feed fish for groundfish in the gulf. Increasing the numbers of migratory fish, such as striped bass and shortnosed sturgeon, in the river could help boost marine fisheries as well.

The Veazie and Great Works (located in Old Town) dams will be bought by the Penobscot River Restoration Trust and removed. A fish by-pass will be built at the Howland dam, so that the structure — a centerpiece of the town — will remain in place although it will cease making power.

The agreement also called for increased power production and fishway improvements at the dams that will remain in operation. PPL Corp. recently received permission from the Federal Energy Commission to slightly increase the height of dams in

Orono, West Enfield and Medway. This will increase the size of the impoundments behind each dam, pushing more water through the turbines and generating more electricity. An additional 10,000 megawatt-hours of electricity, enough to power 1,000 homes, will be generated at these dams.

This increase will remain even if the rest of the project does not come to fruition. If the conservation groups buy the other dams, PPL has the option to increase power generation at the three dams by another 15,000 megawatt-hours.

Low water flows made it impractical to increase power production at the two dams that are slated for removal. Still, the company expects to maintain about 96 percent of current power generation on the river.

The trust needs \$25 million to buy the two dams. It has raised about a third of the needed money with about \$3.5 million coming from the federal government and \$4.5 million from private donors. Bangor Daily News Publisher Richard J. Warren is the chair of the trust’s capital campaign.

During her 2004 visit to the Veazie Salmon Club, Secretary Norton called the project a shining example of the “cooperative conservation” that the Bush administration favored. However, the president and federal agencies involved in the project have never included money for this project in their budgets. Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins have identified the project as a priority for environmental funding, especially through the Department of the Interior. The senators are seeking \$8 million in the 2007 Interior appropriations bill for the project in the next federal budget. They are asking for a little less for the Department of Conservation, which oversees marine fisheries.

This project highlights the benefits of hydroelectric power while appropriately compensating for its environmental detriments.