

Penobscot River project progresses

Trust to buy three dams for removal

By Gale Courey Toensing
TODAY STAFF

OLD TOWN, Maine - Partners in the Penobscot River Restoration Project gathered on the banks of the Penobscot Indian Nation's sacred river to celebrate a major step in their project to restore indigenous sea-run fish species to nearly 1,000 miles of their historic habitat while maintaining the current level of clean, renewable hydroelectric power generation.

With \$25 million in hand, members of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust - a coalition of public and private entities - announced Aug. 21 that they will purchase three dams at the lower end of the river from PPL Corp., an Allentown, Pa.-based power generating company, thereby completing the project's initial phase and moving into the implementation phase.

By exercising its option to buy the dams a year before the option expires, the trust saves \$1 million in the purchase price increase, said Laura Rose Day, the trust's executive director.

"The Penobscot Trust has notified PPL that it intends to purchase the Veazie, Great Works and Howland dams, allowing project partners to move forward with this unprecedented project to rebalance hydropower energy and create sustainable native sea-run fisheries well into the future," Rose Day said.

The \$25 million initial phase of the project has been financed with \$15 million in public funding and \$25 million raised in a private capital campaign. In the remaining phases of the project, the trust will seek another \$30 million

through the same mix of private-public participation.

While the trust moves forward with closing the purchase of the three over the next year, it will also file applications with the numerous federal and state permitting agencies involved in the project. Once the permits are approved, the two lowermost dams on the river, Veazie and Great Works, will be deconstructed. At Howland Dam, around 35 miles upstream of Old Town, the dam will remain in place, but an engineered stream or bypass will be constructed around it.

The power company will recycle turbines from the dams to increase power generation at its other plants.

Rose Day estimated that the dams would come down by 2012.

"On one hand, that seems like a long time, but in river time it's not very long. We've made a lot of progress and already five years have passed."

The removal of the dams and the installation of a new state-of-the-art fish passage at the Millford Dam in Old Town, which will become the first dam on the river, will allow the return of Atlantic salmon, American shad, river herring and seven other species of migratory fish to 1,000 miles of Maine's largest river and its tributaries. The return of healthy fish stocks will have a multiplier effect, benefiting the entire ecosystem from fish-eating birds like eagles, ospreys and herons to predatory fish in the Gulf of Maine, such as cod and other commercially important species.

For the Penobscot people, bringing the river back to its former robust health will be both spiritually and physically restorative, Chief Kirk Francis said.

"The Penobscot people and the river have shared this place for thousands of

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years, and the health of our people is directly tied to the health of this river. Opening up the waterway will revitalize a significant part of our culture and bring back health to our sacred river. We are so grateful to all the people who are helping to make this project a reality."

John Banks, director of the Penobscot Nation's Department of Natural Resources, said the riverside event marked an important milestone in the project's progress and provided a good opportunity for all the partners to get together and celebrate.

"It was a beautiful day," he said. "We had speeches by all of the officials from all the parties, then we had a big meal afterward, a little cookout and a lot of people had canoes and kayaks so they got to do a little paddling around. It was an opportunity to pause for a moment and really show our gratitude toward all of the various private and public partners who are making this possible.

"I think what really excites me about this project is there's so much support behind it all and it just really gives me such a

great sense of hope that such a diverse group of people can all get together for this common goal."

In addition to the Penobscot Indian Nation, trust partners include American Rivers, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Maine Audubon, Natural Resources Council of Maine, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited.

In addition to PPL, other project collaborators are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the BIA, the National Park Service, the state's departments of Marine Resources and of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and the Maine State Planning Office.

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