

Penobscot restoration participants still upbeat

Politicians, conservationists, and industry officials met again on the banks of the Penobscot River in Old Town on Wednesday to make a progress report on the status of the river restoration effort.

The PPL Corporation detailed its plans to increase power production at three dams, which would essentially replace the

power that will be lost when three other dams are removed.

In addition, Penobscot River Restoration Trust officials announced that \$4.5 million has been raised from public sources and another \$3.5 million in federal funds.

All in all, those two announcements were significant, if not unexpected.

But while the media event may have lacked the "Holy Cow" moment of the initial restoration announcement nearly three years ago, it was still worth celebrating.

Three years ago, folks marveled that industry, an Indian nation, conservationists, and federal and state organizations had actually compromised enough to put a massive project in motion.

On Wednesday, they celebrated the fact that they're still working together, and things are still progressing.

"I got involved late in the process [three years ago] and there was still a lot of tug-of-war," Pat Keliher, the executive director of the Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission, said.

"Industry had issues that they needed to protect, conservation groups had their ideas on how conservation should happen," Keliher said. "And when it clicked, you could see it on everybody's face. Everybody realized that there had to be give and take. And when it happened, it was like a load came off everybody's shoulders. Everybody stood up straight and said, 'We're there.'"

On Wednesday, they were still there.

There were the power company executives, smiling and nodding. There was the chief of the Penobscot Indian Nation, providing the most heartfelt words of the process as he described the initial distrust of industry officials and the grief he took from other tribes for the decision to join the restoration effort. Conservationists were still smiling, too.

"I think it's just fantastic. I've always been really attached to the river," said John Daigle, a Penobscot tribal member who is a faculty member at the University of Maine. "Clearly the momentum has to keep going, and a lot more money has to be raised. But I think that there's significant progress so far."

Significant, yes. But sufficient? Not yet.

"We've been real happy on the private side, on the private campaign," said Andy Goode, the vice president of U.S. programs for the Atlantic Salmon Federation. "We need to be farther along than we are with the federal element. They're a signatory to the deal and they've been a great partner, but we really need the administration to put this project in the budget."

The goal, you see, is still substantial. The first \$25 million will be used to buy the dams. Another \$25 million will be needed for dam demolition and other implementation costs.

"I think it's still nothing but good news for the project," said Jeff Reardon, the New England conservation director for Trout Unlimited. "We're ticking off milestones on the schedule we thought we'd be doing them."

And while there's plenty of fundraising work left to be done, those who attended Wednesday's event left feeling upbeat and energized.

"I think it just shows that we're continuing to forge ahead, and that our congressional group is still very much committed to raising the federal dollars that we need for this," said Ray

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"Bucky" Owen, a former commissioner of the Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife and an "ambassador" for the Penobscot River Restoration Trust.

"I'm enthusiastic. We're moving, and the clock's ticking," Owen said. "We've got about two years to raise about \$25 million, and once we acquire the dams, of course we've got \$25 million to raise after that."

On Wednesday, with a breeze blowing off the mighty Penobscot and smiles being flashed all around, those numbers didn't seem quite so large, most agreed.

"This is just step one," Keliher said. "We're gaining all the time. As long as we keep taking steps forward instead of backward, we'll win."

Veazie surprise

Some of the state's leading conservationists gathered at the Penobscot River Conservation Trust's press conference on Wednesday, but not all conversation dealt with river restoration.

It didn't take long for word to spread about a slightly unexpected visitor which had been caught in the Veazie Dam fish trap.

It wasn't a salmon. It wasn't a shad.

It was a brook trout. And it was big.

"I don't know if it was a sea-run brookie or not, but historically this river had a big run of sea-run brook trout," the ASF's Goode explained. "We haven't really been counting those as one of the species that would be restored [by the ongoing effort to remove dams], since they've been gone for so long, but who knows? It's great to see."

Goode said a grate system that allows small fish to escape the trap is in place, indicating that the brookie must have been more than 20 inches long.

TU's Reardon said he has received questions about sea-run brook trout in the river this spring but has chosen to hedge his bet in that regard.

"I've had to say, 'I've got to think they were there because they were in other big rivers, and I know people who have seen them once in awhile in the Sheepscot and even the Kennebec, but I don't have any direct evidence of them being here in the Penobscot,'" Reardon said. "So maybe I've got to change my tune about that a little bit."

Both Reardon and Goode said the fish could have dropped down from a tributary and wasn't necessarily a sea-run brook trout.

But each was also willing to entertain the notion that it was.

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