
River renewal in Bush budget

\$10 million earmarked for Penobscot project

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More than a decade has passed since an Atlantic salmon caught in the Penobscot River by a fisherman at the start of the season was presented to the President of the United States, but the current commander in chief may be setting the groundwork for a return to the annual tradition.

President George Bush is including \$10 million for the Penobscot River Restoration Project in his 2008 budget. The project is an ambitious endeavor to mend damage created by damming the historic waterway, which prevented sea-run fish from traveling upstream.

"This project is the most significant river restoration project that has ever been undertaken in the eastern part of the United States," U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said Friday by phone. "I encouraged the president to endorse the project — to make a real commitment with dollars.

"The \$10 million will really make a difference in moving this project forward," she added.

The Penobscot River restoration project is a

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five-year, \$50 million plan to restore the natural flow of Maine's largest watershed by removing two hydropower dams and bypass a third in an effort to reopen nearly 1,000 miles of habitat to sea-run fish, including endangered Atlantic salmon and sturgeon.

The Penobscot River is the second largest watershed in New England.

"This is important to everyone — for the Penobscots who see the river as part of their heritage, the communities that will see additional recreational benefits from the restoration and those who fish the waterway," Collins said. "It's really extraordinary in its scope."

In addition to fish habitats, the project also will have far-reaching benefits for migratory birds and a diversity of riverine and estuary wetlands.

The list of partners working collaboratively on the project is long and includes, but is not limited to, the state of Maine

and its congressional delegation, Penobscot Indian Nation, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Atlantic Salmon Federation, PPL Corporation, Natural Resources of Maine, and other environmental organizations and local fishing groups.

"I've never seen a project with broader support," Collins said.

"I cannot think of a single better way for any federal agency to spend \$10 million to support fish and wildlife," Steve Moyer, spokesman for Trout Unlimited, a fisheries conservation organization, stated in a press release.

In 2006, approximately 90 percent of all Atlantic salmon returning to New England to spawn returned to the Penobscot River, he said.

The river project is especially important to American Indians who for centuries have based their lives around the waterway. "For more than 1,000 years, the Penobscot River has been the heart of our homeland,"

Penobscot Chief Kirk Francis stated in a press release. "Our identity as a tribe is deeply intertwined with the health of the river. The river's restoration is critical to our cultural survival."

The funds are part of the U.S. Department of Commerce fiscal year 2008 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration budget and will provide \$8 million to purchase the dams and \$2 million for research, engineering and monitoring provided under the NOAA's Office of Habitat.

"Restoring the Penobscot by removing dams and installing fishways has national significance," U.S. Rep. Tom Allen, D-Maine, said in a prepared statement. "By bringing together local communities, environmentalists, state and federal officials, and dam owners to work toward a common goal, this project serves as a model for cooperative conservation."

So far, more than \$7.5 million has been raised from private sources, \$4.5 million in previous federal funds has been collected and the state has committed to

providing \$3.5 million to help communities in the region strengthen their connections with the river.

"This is an important development in the ongoing efforts to restore the Penobscot River," Gov. John Baldacci said in a Friday e-mail. "Including \$10 million in the budget is a significant step and a strong sign of support for the efforts to renew the river's ecosystem and economic vitality."

If enacted by Congress this year, the funding will likely become a catalyst for additional funding.

The funds are great news for the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, a not-for-profit corporation of groups that are overseeing the project, Laura Rose Day, executive director of the trust, said Friday.

"We're really pleased by the federal support of the project, especially with the recent U.S.

Fish and Wildlife [Service] award of \$1 million," she said. "It really shows a growing momentum to get the project done. It's a federal investment — the fisheries benefit, the tribe benefits and there is a benefit to the region."

"The paycheck will be great for the people of Maine," Day said.