

Two river restoration projects awarded \$1.8M in federal funds

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Two river conservation and restoration projects in Maine reeled in some \$1.8 million last week.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has awarded nearly \$1 million to the Penobscot River Restoration Project and approximately \$800,000 to the Back River Land Acquisition Project for the Kennebec River.

The Penobscot River restoration project stems from an agreement years in the making that calls for the removal of two dams and bypassing a third in an effort to reopen an estimated 500 miles of habitat for such fish as the endangered Atlantic salmon and sturgeon.

"We're continuing to build support for the project," Cheryl Daigle, community liaison and outreach coordinator for the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, said Sunday.

"We already have tremendous support, but there's still people that want to know about the project."

As of September, the coalition had raised an estimated \$5 million from private donations and been offered about \$3.5 million from federal coffers.

Now, the amount from private donations has risen to about \$7 million, and with the latest grant the federal money geared toward the project stands at \$4.5 million.

On a more local level, area salmon clubs are starting fundraising of their own.

"To us, it's as significant to have that support as it is to have the state and federal and other private funds," Daigle said.

Representatives of more than a dozen groups, from Maine government to area salmon clubs, called the restoration agreement a national model for cooperative conservation because it brings together groups that often disagree.

As part of the deal, a coalition of conservation groups, government agencies and the Penobscot Nation agreed to buy the dams; Great Works in Old Town and Veazie and the Howland dam will be bypassed. The purchase from PPL Corp. totals \$25 million. In return, the groups agreed to allow PPL to increase power generation at several other dams and not to oppose company efforts to relicense the dams.

"We've always expected that there's so many facets and so many benefits to the project that the funding would come from many different places for many different reasons," Laura Rose Day, executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, said Sunday. "People are reconnecting to the river in all kinds of ways."

Maine is one of 14 states to receive the funding under the National Coastal Wetlands Grant program to help conserve, restore and protect coastal wetlands, according to a press release from U.S. Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins.

The grants provide funding for 25 projects and will be supplemented with more than \$54 million from partners including state and local governments, private landowners and conservation groups.