

Breaching of Veazie Dam begins as part of Penobscot River Restoration

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Demolition crews breach the Veazie Dam Monday in Veazie, Maine.



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EDDINGTON, Maine — Hundreds of onlookers stood on the banks of the Penobscot River on Monday morning, watching as demolition crews breached the Veazie Dam, continuing the process of opening the river to sea-run fish for the first time in almost 200 years.

The Veazie Dam is the farthest downstream dam on the river, and serves as the first barrier to passage that sea-run fish face when they swim up the Penobscot.

The dam removal was the latest accomplishment of the Penobscot River Restoration Project, an effort that will remove two dams and provide fish bypass at a third in order to open nearly 1,000 miles of river and stream habitat that has been inaccessible to fish.

The landmark river restoration project is a joint effort of the Penobscot Indian Nation, the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, six other nongovernmental organizations, the state of Maine, the U.S. Department of the Interior, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and hydropower companies.

Penobscot Chief Kirk Francis heralded Monday's breaching of the Veazie Dam, which took place at about 11 a.m., as an important moment in tribal history.

"To the Penobscot [people], this river is our very soul," Francis said. "It's a place where we truly hold hands with our history and our ancestors. With each step of this project, we feel that much closer to [the river], and realizing our people's dream of this river in its natural state, providing for and nurturing our people in many ways, as it has always done."

Francis said the site of Monday's ceremony was appropriate as well.

"It is this site that delineated the Penobscot territory in early treaties, defined as 'the head of tide,'" Francis said. "The land on the west side of this river, historically, had large Penobscot encampments, a stockade village, with an abundance of crops and strawberries, a thriving life. For 10 miles north from these places, there were Penobscot villages all along this river."

The removal of Great Works Dam in Bradley, which began June 11, 2012, was the first part of the project. The removal of that dam was completed in November 2012, and the Veazie project is expected to be completed next summer.

Supporters of the river restoration project say that removing the century-old Veazie Dam, which spans the river from Veazie to Eddington, will help restore about 225 acres of in-stream habitat and about 65 acres of streamside habitat, while enhancing the connectivity and functional value of 188,000 acres of wetland habitats for native sea-run fish, including endangered Atlantic salmon, endangered shortnose, Atlantic sturgeon and eight other fish species.

Monday's event kicked off with ceremonial drumming and singing by Penobscot Indian Nation members. A slate of speakers representing many of the project's stakeholders followed, praising the efforts of many.

John Bullard, regional administrator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said the breach of the Veazie Dam helps his agency get closer to solving a problem that has existed for years.

"When I took my job, which involves managing fish in federal waters, I said that my job would be a lot easier if we knew how to make fish," Bullard said. "This is where we make fish."

And Bullard was among those who focused on the cooperative nature of the project, and the cultural components that helped inspire some participants.

"As the tribal leaders have mentioned, this is also repairing breaches that transcend generations," he said. "This is about intergenerational justice. This is repairing that breach as well."

Bullard proudly pointed out that NOAA helped secure \$21 million to partially fund the project, and on Monday he announced that another \$1.4 million in species recovery grants, via a federal fishery habitat conservation program, will help fund follow-up work after the Veazie Dam is removed.

Patrick Keliher, the commissioner of the Maine Department of Marine Resources, stressed a piece of the project that was a hallmark of its success: River restoration needn't mean that hydropower needs are ignored.

“Hydropower production on this river has not been lost,” Keliher pointed out, explaining that power production will actually increase because the 2004 agreements allowed PPL Corporation to increase generation at six existing dams.

According to a project press release, the present power generation partner — Black Bear Hydro Partners LLC — is now completing projects that will increase generation at those dams, including facilities at Stillwater and Orono.

“This economy will thrive because of this project,” Keliher said. “We will maintain production of power, but with the restoration of these species comes other benefits to these local economies.”

And Keliher said that experience on other rivers where dams have been removed, including the Kennebec River's Edwards Dam, shows that impacts will be felt very soon after the Veazie Dam is completely removed.

“[The Edwards Dam removal] shows directly that while man does his best to knock the snot out of these rivers, they do heal,” Keliher said. “They do come back.”

Laura Rose Day, executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust, thanked those who'd helped bring the project to fruition.

“I am so grateful to the people who kept watch over this river for so many years, and made possible what is happening today,” Rose Day said.

Livestream video of the Veazie Dam breach during the event was provided courtesy of Bronson Audio Visual & Event Services Inc.

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