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Creeping water problem solved in Howland

After 4 1/2 years, Howland man's creeping water problem is solved

By Nick Sambides Jr.

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY NICK SAMBIDES JR.
John York of Howland no longer worries about his home being overcome by the waters of Merrill Brook. **Buy Photo**

HOWLAND, Maine — John and Kathy York expected to find their home in Merrill Brook someday, not beside it.

Since 2005, York's family residence has been facing ruin from slowly rising waters caused, he maintains, by a river restoration project that involves in part raising the height of several dams. The dams include the West Enfield hydroelectric facility, which is about one-third of a mile downstream from York's property.

But the destruction has at least been postponed.

An agreement with power company PPL Corp. of Allentown, Pa., Bangor-Pacific Hydro Associates and possibly Penobscot River Restoration Trust has led to Thornton Construction of Milford rebuilding the land around York's property to keep it above the dam impoundment.

The work, which began about three weeks ago, is about two weeks from finished, York said. As part of the deal, Thornton has installed riprap — a wall composed mostly of rocks packed together — around York's property to prevent flooding and erosion.

A new septic system, a 2-foot elevation of the house and road leading to it, new decks and lots of big rocks and sand to prevent erosion are also part of the project being handled by Thornton and other contractors. New grass is already coming in under the straw construction workers laid.

"It's pretty amazing," York, 53, said of the deal, which he credits Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, with helping arrange. But the deal ended a multiyear fight with PPL and Bangor-Pacific, he said.

"If they had listened to us 4½ years ago, when they started, it could all have been avoided," he said.

PPL officials could not be reached for comment Thursday.

As part of a project to open up nearly 1,000 miles of habitat to Atlantic salmon, alewives and other sea-run fish now blocked from migrating upstream, Penobscot River Restoration Trust has raised more than \$25 million to buy the Howland, Veazie and Great Works hydropower dams to remove or install fish bypasses at the dams.

In return, PPL will be allowed to increase power generation at six other dams to offset the losses at the three.

The company also opted to raise the water level by a foot at West Enfield and two other dams to generate an additional 10,000 megawatt-hours of electricity annually, inadvertently causing York's problem. But part of PPL's modified license from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission required the company to determine the impact on York's property and to help mitigate any harm.

The situation got pretty dire, York said. At one point, the rising water was about six feet from his house.

No other properties along the brook have had such severe problems, York said, because none is as close to the water. York's grandfather built the house decades before zoning laws required farther setbacks.

Now that his property is safe, York said, he can concentrate on building his business. As a fisherman and owner of three waterfront cabins catering to the sporting type, York, ironically, loves the trust's plan to bring salmon and other fish back to the brook.

"I really hope that they are successful," he said.

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