

Great Works Dam destruction starts

Penobscots play crucial role in fostering project

BY TOM BELL

The Portland Press Herald

INDIAN ISLAND — Bill Townsend is an old man now, at 84, but steady enough on his feet to walk down the muddy bank of the Penobscot River and watch as excavators smashed the defunct concrete fishway of the Great Works Dam.

"I am so excited to listen to the sound of those jackhammers whacking away at that concrete," he said on Monday as he observed the first day of a five-month project to remove the dam. "This is a day I knew would come, but I didn't know when."

Townsend, a leader in salmon habitat protection, was a middle-aged man 26 years ago when he launched a fight against a proposed hydroelectric dam at Basin Mills, just downstream from here. The federal government's decision more than a decade later to kill that project set in motion an ambitious plan for the river's revival.

Although decades in the making, Monday's events marked the official start of a \$62 million effort to remove two dams and improve fish passages at two other dams.

The project is viewed as a model for other restoration efforts in the nation because of a collaborative approach involving environmentalists, hydro power companies, the federal government and the Penobscot



Portland Press Herald photo by Gordon Chibroski

TIME TO GO: The Great Works Dam removal started Monday. This is a view of the dam in Old Town on the Penobscot River.

Indians.

The terms of a multi-party agreement will allow power companies to increase power generation elsewhere in the river watershed so there will be no loss of power production.

"It's really a great day for America and a great example for anyone who believes anything is possible," said Ken Salazar, secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, at a news conference on Monday on the riverbank in the town of Bradley.

Hundreds of people watched the start of the demolition — in person or on video at Sockalexis Hall, the bingo hall on Indian Island.

Speakers included Chief Kirk Francis, of the Penobscot Indian Nation; U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud,

D-2nd District; and U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, D-1st District.

Maine Department of Marine Resources Commissioner Pat Keliher announced that 50,000 alewives have been stocked this spring above the dams. The fish will swim downriver to the ocean later this summer; and when they return in four or five years, they will be able to return to spawning grounds because the restoration project will be complete.

Besides restoring salmon habitat, the project will lead to huge increases in the population of other sea-run fish, including shad and alewives and boost fisheries in the Gulf of Maine, he said.

PLEASE SEE DAM A4

Dam

FROM A1

The federal government is funding half the project. Private donors and foundations are paying for the rest.

Eric Schwaab, a top official at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, announced Monday that his agency will spend an additional \$1 million in its current budget for the project. Salazar said he will recommend an additional \$2.5 million for the project.

The Penobscot Indian Nation has played a critical role in the project.

The Penobscots' status as a sovereign Indian tribe gave the it leverage during the federal license renewal process for the hydroelectric dams in the watershed.

Collaborating with environmental groups, the tribe argued that the federal government is required to ensure proper management and protection of tribal natural resources, including the right to harvest fish within the waters of its jurisdiction.

A deal was reached in 2004 that gave the dam owners certainty over future federal regulation and allowed them to make investments in other hydro dams in the river basin.

The Veazie Dam — scheduled for demolition in 2013 and 2014

— is eight miles downstream from Great Works and is the last physical barrier to juvenile salmon reaching Penobscot Bay and the sea.

In addition, significantly improved fish passages will be installed at two other dams — an elevator to lift fish over the Milford Dam, located just downstream from Indian Island; and a fish bypass at the Howland Dam.

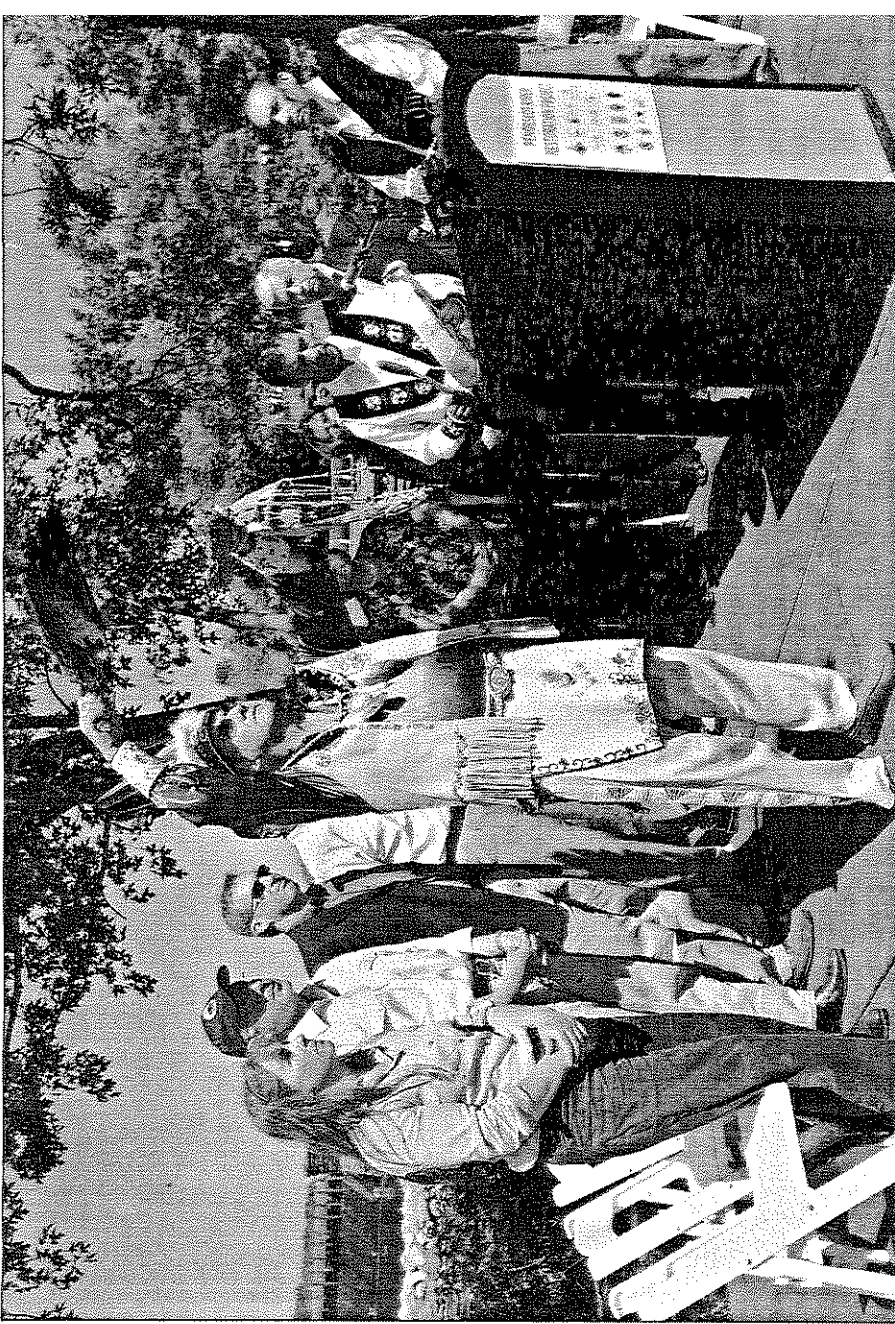
Butch Phillips, 72, a Penobscot elder, said the river was an "open sewer" when he was growing up on Indian Island.

There were no birds of prey, such as bald eagles; and the only fish he could find were eels, pickerel and sunfish.

When the dams were built, he said, the Penobscot Indians lost their culture as a river people. The return of sea-run fish will allow that culture to be restored.

Before the excavators began their work, Phillips and two other tribe members performed an "honor" dance besides the river bank and asked the Great Spirit to heal the river.

"As the river becomes free-flowing again, it will sing the ancient songs as it dances over the falls, rapids and sandbars, that also have been reborn," he said in a prayer. "The fish from the sea will respond again to the age-old calling, to their ancestral spawning grounds, that have been unreachable for many generations."



GETTING RIGHT: The Great Works Dam removal starts Monday with a ceremony led by Butch Phillips of the Penobscot Nation, who did the smudging that will bring everybody into the same frame of mind, according to past chief Barry Dana, beating a drum by the lectern.

Portland Press Herald photo by Gordon Chitbrose