

Group will buy dams, restore wild fish runs

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The Penobscot River Restoration Trust plans to remove two dams and create a bypass at one.

By **JOHN RICHARDSON**
Staff Writer

An ambitious plan to restore fisheries in the Penobscot River is shifting into a new phase, now that organizers have raised \$25 million to buy three dams that stand in the way of salmon and other fish.

"We have the money to buy the dams. This obviously puts us in a very good position," said Laura Rose Day, executive director of the Penobscot River Restoration Trust.

The plan ultimately calls for removing two of the dams and creating a fish bypass at the third.

That work would cost an additional \$25 million, which has not yet been raised.

The completion of the initial fundraising efforts means orga-

nizers can focus now on plans for removing or modifying the dams once they complete the purchase this year.

President Bush effectively put the initial fundraising effort over the top last week when he signed a \$555 billion spending bill that includes \$10 million for the Penobscot restoration effort.

Day said the project has attracted widespread support because it will restore runs of Atlantic salmon, shad and alewives and will restore a recreational, commercial and cultural resource for the people of the Penobscot basin and well beyond.

The project also is being watched from outside the state as one of the more creative and ambitious efforts to restore wild fisheries.

"It really is a project of significance well beyond the state," Day said. "Salmon is a keystone

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species and has so much symbolic value. But, really, it's the whole sweep of fish species, and it goes well beyond fish.

It's about wildlife and tribal culture and community opportunities."

Chief Kirk Francis of the Penobscot Indian Nation called the final \$10 million a long-awaited Christmas present in a statement released last week as Congress sent the spending bill to the president.

"The Penobscot Indian people - whose homeland includes the Penobscot River watershed - have waited patiently for many years to see the once great fishery runs of the Penobscot restored," Francis said.

The federal funding represented a major achievement for Maine's congressional delega-

tion.

Members worked for years to win the funds and succeeded in a difficult budget year, Day said.

A 2004 Penobscot restoration agreement gives the trust an option to buy the Veazie, Great Works and Howland dams from PPL Maine for \$25 million.

Under the agreement, the Veazie and Great Works dams would be removed and a fish bypass would be installed at the Howland dam. Other dams along the river are being modified to make up for the loss of energy production.

The project will improve access to key habitat for Atlantic salmon, endangered shortnose sturgeon, American shad and eight other species of sea-run fish that once thrived in the Penobscot River, according to the trust.

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