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Interior secretary hears pleas of Mainers

Conservation needs outlined in Brewer

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OF THE NEWS STAFF

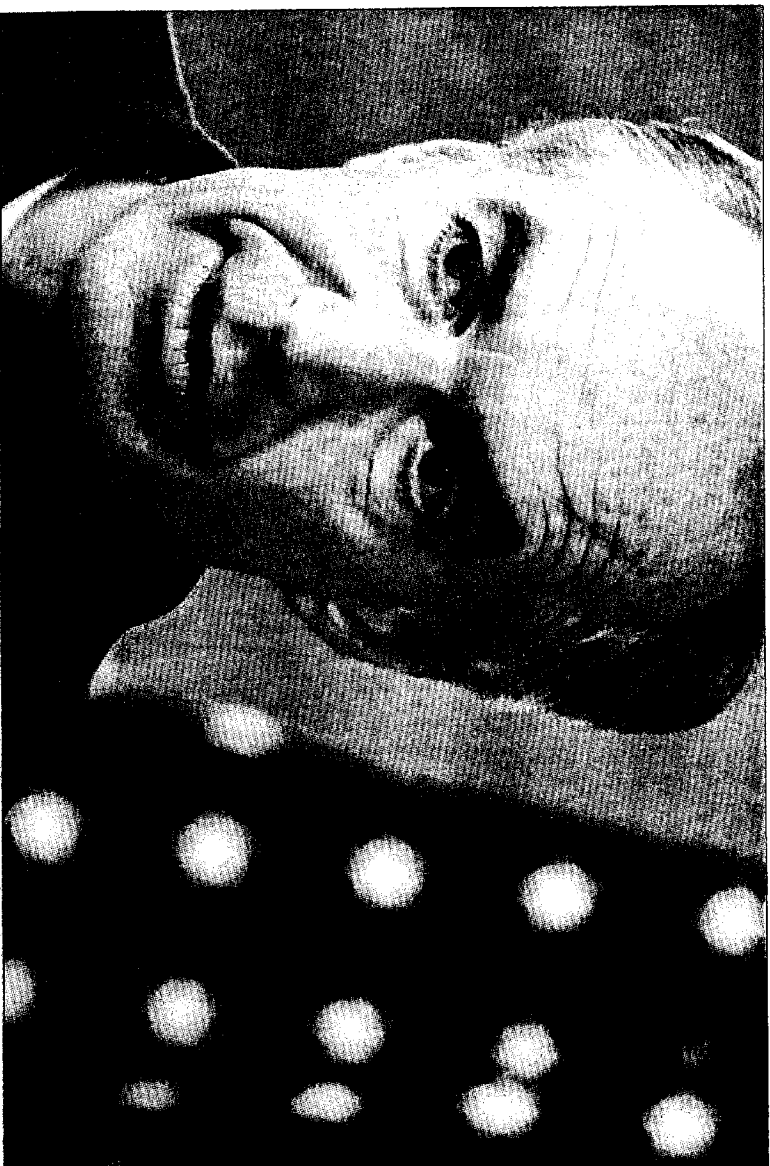
BREWER — Speaker after speaker told top Bush administration officials Wednesday that the Penobscot River restoration plan could serve as the poster child for groups setting aside differences in the name of conservation.

All that's left is for the federal government to fulfill its end of the deal, speakers said.

U.S. Department of the Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne came to Maine this week as part of a national tour to gather ideas on how to encourage more collaboration between government, private groups, businesses and individuals on conservation and environmental protection.

Roughly 150 people showed up at Jeff's Catering and Conference Center in Brewer to share their ideas on what the Bush administration is calling "cooperative conservation."

And nearly half of the 50 who spoke had the same message:



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KATE COLLINS

Maine needs more federal money to keep alive the hard-fought restoration plan for the Penobscot.

"If you and the president are serious about cooperative conservation, then I implore you to use your leadership position to secure the necessary funding for this project," said Matt Prindiville, a policy advocate for the Natural Resources Council of Maine.

Negotiated over several years, the Penobscot River Restoration Agreement calls for the removal

of two dams in the Penobscot and bypassing a third in an effort to re-open an estimated 500 miles of habitat for such fish as the endangered Atlantic salmon and sturgeon.

Under terms of the deal, a coalition of conservation groups, government agencies and the Penobscot Nation agreed to buy the dams from PPL Corp. for \$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.

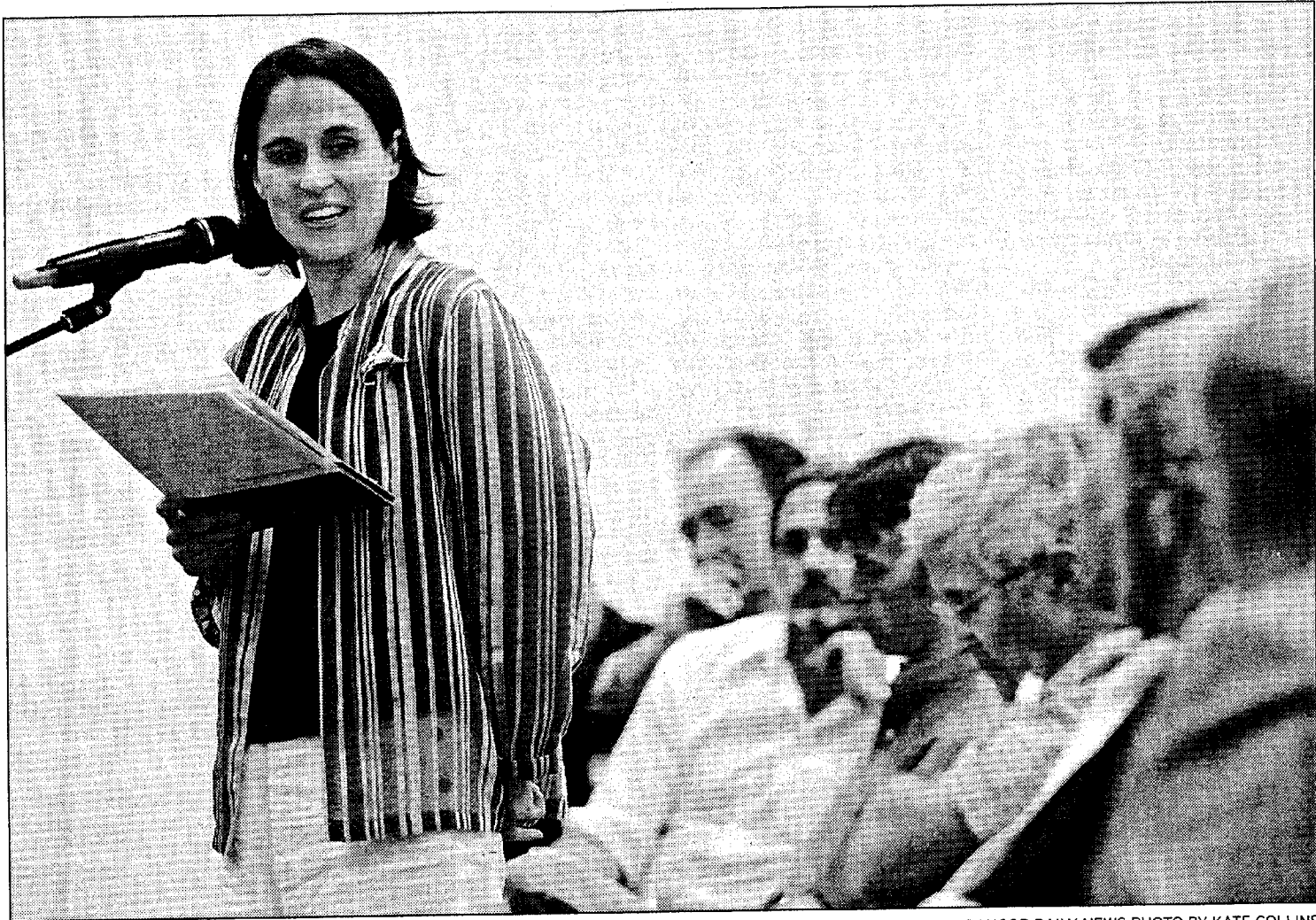
"It is without doubt the best example of cooperative conservation in Maine and in the nation from our standpoint," said Patrick Kelhey, executive director of the Maine Atlantic Salmon Commission, who was speaking at the meeting on behalf of Gov. John Baldacci.

So far the coalition has raised an estimated \$5 million from private donations and been offered about \$3.5 million from federal coffers. But they had hoped to receive about \$18 million from

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Dirk Kempthorne, secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, talks at a news conference

Wednesday at the Acadia National Park headquarters. He also attended a hearing in Brewer.



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KATE COLLINS

Kate Dempsey of The Nature Conservancy in Maine addresses Dirk Kempthorne, secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, and other officials during a public session on conservation Wednesday at Jeff's Catering in Brewer.

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the federal government for a project that many describe as the most significant habitat restoration effort in Maine history.

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

Several members of Maine's

Indian tribes urged the federal government to live up its obligations to respect and help support the traditions and cultures of native people.

"The inherent right to fish includes the right to have fish to catch, otherwise the inherent right to fish is reduced to words on paper," said Maria Girouard, acting director of cultural and historic preservation for the Penobscot Nation.

The Penobscot restoration was not the only topic covered.

More than a half-dozen speakers urged Kempthorne and other federal officials to end the

current process of designating roughly 11,000 acres in Maine as critical habitat for Canada lynx, which are protected by the Endangered Species Act. Critics said the designation is unnecessary in Maine and could hurt the forestry practices allowing the lynx to thrive.

Others urged the panel to strengthen the Endangered Species Act, while a few representatives of the homebuilding industry criticized the federal law as too stringent.

Supporters of the Sunhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge in Milford also urged the

official to restore funding for the sole staff position at the refuge. And members of the volunteer group from Acadia National Park urged the federal government to fully fund national parks.

Addressing the crowd at the end of the 3½-hour meeting, Kempthorne said the crowd made strong statements about the need for additional funding for the Penobscot project but he made no promises.

President Bush is expected to submit his proposed Fiscal Year 2008 budget to Congress in February.