

# Penobscot project is halfway to \$50M goal

Almost five years ago, the announcement was greeted with gasps, smiles, cheers ... and truth be known, a small dose of apprehension.

In public, everyone said the right things: The ambitious plan to restore the Penobscot River by removing two dams and adding fish passage to another was a good idea.



**JOHN HOLYOKE**

A great idea. A milestone cooperative effort that would be viewed as a model for future projects across the country.

But in private, there were whispers.

The project was ambitious ... and expensive.

And there (if a problem truly existed) was the rub.

*"How are they going to go about raising \$50 million to restore the Penobscot River?"* folks whispered.

The first phase called for \$25 million to be raised so that the dams could be purchased from the power company that owns them, PPL Corporation. The second phase would be a fund-raising campaign for the \$25 million that would be needed to remove dams at Veazie and Great Works, and to create a bypass channel for fish passage in Howland.

On Thursday, many of the same people who gathered on the banks of the Penobscot reconvened on the same Old Town site and announced that the first phase of the project was nearing completion.

The Penobscot River Restoration Trust has notified PPL Corporation that it intends to exercise its purchase option on the dams, pending the approval of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

State, federal and tribal officials, along with conservation groups and PPL, were beaming again. The smiles seemed broader, the cheers louder.

Many stepped up to the lectern and shared a few thoughts, but the overall message was simple.

\$25 million down.

\$25 million to go.

Gov. John Baldacci, one of those who was on hand to mark the announcement, admits that in the beginning, funding appeared to be the biggest roadblock to the project's success.

"I think [concerns] have largely been about finances," Baldacci said. "That seems to be the one thing, and they seem to have gotten a leg up on that at this point ... now they have the foundation. They have the investment by the federal partnerships, so now everybody's buying in to it. That was, to me, always what the biggest hurdle was."

Kirk Francis, the chief of the Penobscot Indian Nation, said that in the beginning, many involved with the project were a bit worried about the price tag attached.

"When we started to look at the project with the [Penobscot River] Restoration Trust, I think everybody said, 'This is kind of a mountain to climb from a funding standpoint,'" Francis said. "But now, we don't really have those concerns any more, because the people really are in place, the momentum is growing, the federal agencies have made a strong commitment."

Federal partnerships have been crucial, as \$15 million of the \$25 raised thus far has come from federal government.

Another \$10 million came from private sources.

Andrew Goode, the vice president for U.S. Programs of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, said that fund-raising would continue to be a challenge.

The ASF is one of the many partners in the Penobscot River Restoration Project.

"You have ups and downs in terms of funding," Goode said. "Right now the fiscal climate in Washington is very challenging. So the next couple of years

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is going to be tough, to raise the type of money that we've raised the last few years, in federal funding."

And while future federal support will continue to be essential, Goode said that the future of private fund-raising efforts will shift a bit in the coming months and years.

"The first part of the private fund-raising had to do with just major donors," Goode said. "That \$10 million was a small number of large gifts. I think in this second phase of this project, it's going to have to be a large number of small gifts. It is going to be a different approach."

While raising the necessary funds was and is a primary concern, Goode said it was important for the coalition of project partners to work together in order to recognize potential problems and deal with as early as possible.

In Howland, for instance, Goode said the dam is a barrier to fish passage that he'd rather didn't exist.

Community concerns, however, quickly became apparent, and Penobscot Restoration Project representatives did their best to find a solution that everyone could live with.

"The best thing for salmon would be to take the Howland Dam out, but instead we've worked with the community, trying to assess the situation so that we've met the community's needs," Goode said.

As a result, a bypass channel will be constructed, and residents of Howland will still be able to enjoy the head pond above the dam.

Another concern that could have led to dissent: Losing electrical generation capacity during time when fuel prices continue to rise.

Goode said PPL's stance on the issue was a key. Company officials have pointed out that they'd actually be able to add 20,000 megawatt-hours per year of production due to increased capacity at other Maine dams it owns.

"There's been no organized opposition to this project," Goode said. "There's the occasional person that thinks we should be building more dams rather than taking them out, but I think one of our best messages is the energy message. If we weren't replacing the hydropower, this project would be very vulnerable to not happen."

Francis said that the tribe's participation as a stakeholder in the project was something he's proud of, pointing out that the Penobscot Indian Nation has a long history of providing meaningful input when they've been given space at the decision-making tables.

And Francis said getting the chance to balance societal requirements with traditional values is a hallmark of the restoration project.

"The generation of electricity through hydropower is extremely important," Francis said. "We have to find a way, as this project has done, to balance what is needed against environmental responsibility. And that's really what this project stands for. We're just proud to be a part of it."

Francis said tribal members have told him they share his sentiment.

"I think our tribe is extremely excited. There's a whole cultural component that will come back as a result of this project,"

he said. "And as a river people, the health of this river is very, very important."

Thankfully, up and down the Penobscot, it seems that more and more people are beginning to identify themselves as "river people."

The Penobscot is in the spotlight again, and people are recognizing its true worth. Its health is a concern. And progress is being made.

That's an attitude that Francis and other Penobscot River Restoration Project partners can appreciate.

"We really need to all do our parts," Francis said. "This river connects hundreds of communities, thousands of people, and, I believe anyway, that the health of the river really has a direct effect on the health of those communities."

Baldacci looks at things similarly. He says urban renewal that took place in Bangor diverted attention away from the great river that ran past it, and it has taken awhile for people to turn back to the Penobscot.

"Billy Cohen and I used to say, 'We lost the heart and soul when we lost our downtown.' We lost that vibrancy," Baldacci said.

That downtown, not coincidentally, was near the river.

But Baldacci said the American Folk Festival, recent development along the river, and the ongoing work along the waterfront have all rejuvenated the downtown and riverfront district.

"[People are] recognizing the rivers are our lifeblood, both environmentally and economically," Baldacci said. "It draws people together."

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