

Restoring fish, preserving culture

Penobscot River Restoration Project receives national award

By Gale Courney Toensing

TODAY STAFF

WASHINGTON – The Penobscot River Restoration Project has been nationally recognized for its outstanding work to restore endangered wild Atlantic salmon and other native migratory sea-run fish while balancing the need for hydroelectric power on the river.

At an April 21 ceremony in Washington, Interior Department Secretary Dirk Kempthorne presented a Cooperative Conservation Award to the Penobscot Indian Nation, the Penobscot River Restoration Trust and the PPL Corp., an energy company that generates electricity and owns dams on the river.

The PRRT is a collaboration among tribal, federal and state governments, and industry and conservation groups in an unprecedented alliance to restore the damaged river.

The project had its beginnings in the 1990s deregulation of the electric industry when PPL purchased the dams and hydroelectric generation plants. The company, the tribe, Interior, the state and conservation groups began to explore a comprehensive vision for hydropower re-licensing, migratory fish passages and ecological restoration of the river.

The PRRT was formed in 2004 as a nonprofit organization for the purpose of implementing the restoration project, and includes representation from all the partners. In addition to

the Penobscot Indian Nation and federal and state governments, the partners include American Rivers, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Maine Audubon, Natural Resources Council of Maine, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited.

The PRRT will remove dams to help restore native fisheries by improving access to nearly 1,000 miles of habitat for Atlantic salmon, American shad, shortnose sturgeon, and several other species of sea-run fish that once formed

a thriving ecosystem in the Penobscot River and supported cultural, recreational and economic opportunities.

In an Interior press release, Kempthorne praised the project as "one of the most ecologically significant and innovative river restoration efforts in the nation. It represents the last best chance to save wild Atlantic salmon from extinction in the United States, as well as restoring 100 percent of the historic habitat in Maine's largest river for endangered shortnose sturgeon

and severely depleted Atlantic sturgeon populations, along with eight other species of migratory fish."

The Penobscot River is the second largest river system in the Northeast, and its tributaries and brooks form an 8,570-square-mile watershed.

Penobscot Chief Kirk Francis went to the Washington ceremony to receive the award.

"The Penobscot Indian Nation – whose ties to the river go back more than 10,000 years – is deeply appreciative of this award, and the Department of the Interior's recognition that the project is not just about removing dams and restoring fish, but also about our cultural survival. This project really shows what we can achieve by working collaboratively to protect the environment, renew our cultural traditions, and provide for local economics," Francis said in an April 21 press release issued by the PRRT.

In the same release, Laura Rose Day,

the trust's executive director, praised all the partners for their work to restore "this great river."

"Through the creativity and commitment of all these parties, we've constructed a plan that will restore the valuable sea-run fisheries of the Penobscot River and cultural, ecological and economic benefits, while maintaining hydropower generation."

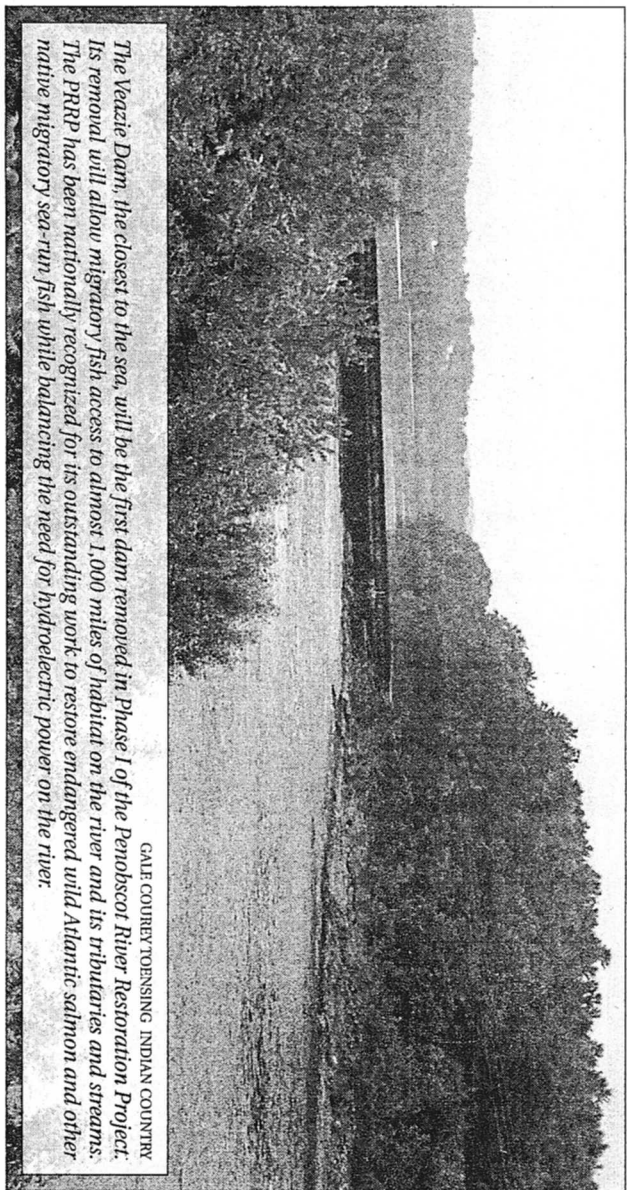
Last November, the trust announced that it had met its first private campaign milestone by raising \$10 million toward the approximately \$25 million purchase price of three hydropower dams at the core of the restoration project. A month later, the trust announced the project would receive a \$10 million appropriation from the federal government to be directed through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. With approximately \$5 million previously raised, the project can move forward toward its first phase – the purchase of Veazie and Great Works, the two dams closest to the ocean, will be removed. At Howland, a fish bypass will be built.

The project will allow PPL to maintain energy generation by increasing production at six locations.

Dennis Murphy, PPL vice president and CEO, said in the release that the project was a "win-win" situation for everyone.

"We're pleased to be a part of this groundbreaking project, which balances our obligations to our shareholders and our energy customers with our strong commitment to the environment."

Interior presents the Cooperative Conservation Award to groups and individuals who have realized significant conservation goals. This year, 21 awards were presented in recognition of the work of more than 700 groups and individuals who achieved excellence in conservation through collaboration and partnerships.



The Veazie Dam, the closest to the sea, will be the first dam removed in Phase I of the Penobscot River Restoration Project. Its removal will allow migratory fish access to almost 1,000 miles of habitat on the river and its tributaries and streams. The PRRT has been nationally recognized for its outstanding work to restore endangered wild Atlantic salmon and other native migratory sea-run fish while balancing the need for hydroelectric power on the river.

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