

Penobscot fish passage restoration gets \$450,000

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A coalition has received \$450,000 from the federal government in support of the group's work to restore historic fish passage routes in the Penobscot River.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration awarded the money to the Penobscot River Restoration Trust's ambitious plan to re-open nearly 1,000 miles of habitat in the Penobscot watershed to sea-run fish.

The money will help the coalition conduct environmental and engineering studies needed to obtain permits to remove the Veazie and Great Works dams and build a state-of-the-art fish bypass around the Howland dam.

Retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, NOAA administrator and undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere, said in a statement released Friday that the money will support crucial design and assessment studies for the project.

"If Congress appropriates the president's request for an additional \$10 million for this project in FY 2008, we will be on our way to restoring self-sustaining populations of Atlantic salmon, shortnose sturgeon, alewife, and other sea-run fish to the Penobscot River and beyond," Lautenbacher said.

Signed in June 2004, the river restoration agreement was an unprecedented pact among conservation groups, government agencies and a dam owner to

revive the Penobscot's decimated stocks of sea-run fish.

Under the agreement, PPL Corp. agreed to sell the three dams to the trust for \$25 million. In exchange, PPL was permitted to increase power generation at several dams. The coalition members also agreed not to fight relicensing for PPL's dams.

The nonprofit Penobscot River Restoration Trust is composed of the following organizations: the Penobscot Nation, American Rivers, Atlantic Salmon Federation, Natural Resources Council of Maine, Maine Audubon, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited.

Laura Rose Day, executive director of the trust, praised the bipartisan support for the project and Maine's congressional delegation for their

work to secure additional funding.

"With this grant, NOAA confirms the tremendous value of restoring the river's natural functions and reconnecting the Penobscot River to the sea," Day said in a statement.

To date, the trust has garnered about \$9 million from private sources and \$5.4 million in federal funds with the help of Maine's congressional delegation. Both the House and the Senate have included President Bush's \$10 million budget item in their respective appropriations bills, but they have not been finalized.

Removing the Veazie and Great Works dams and bypassing the Howland dam are expected to cost an additional \$25 million.