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River group seeks more federal aid

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OF THE NEWS STAFF

OLD TOWN — Supporters of a two-year-old deal to restore Atlantic salmon and other sea-run fish to the Penobscot River celebrated their initial successes Wednesday but called on the federal government to pay its share of the project cost.

Using the surging waters of the Penobscot as a backdrop, several signatories to the river restoration deal said they are making steady progress on their quest to reopen 500 miles of habitat by removing two dams and bypassing a third.

One example touted Wednesday was power company PPL Corp.'s plan to increase generation at several

other dams in anticipation of decommissioning the Veazie, Great Works and Howland dams.

While attendees praised the \$4.5 million private donations garnered so far, they urged the federal government to do more to help cover the \$25 million price tag to purchase the three PPL dams. The Penobscot River Restoration Trust has until

June 2009 to raise the money under the terms of the pact.

"They have been a good partner, we just need them to step up to make sure the project succeeds," Andrew Goode, vice president of U.S. programs for the Atlantic Salmon Federation, said after the event. The federation is a member of the Penob-

See River, Page A12



Sappier

River

Continued from Page A1

scot River Restoration Trust, a coalition of interest groups ranging from the Penobscot Nation to The Nature Conservancy.

Leaders of the nonprofit trust are seeking \$18 million from the federal government to acquire the dams. To date, federal sources have budgeted \$3.5 million to the project.

With the fundraising clock ticking, members of Maine's congressional delegation are requesting \$14 million from various sources in the 2007 budget. That money is far from guaranteed given the tight budget climate in Washington, according to delegation members.

"More federal dollars are definitely needed for this project," U.S. Rep. Michael Michaud told the crowd gathered Wednesday at Old Town's Spencer Park. Michaud appeared in person, while representatives from Sens. Olympia Snowe's and Susan Collins' offices read statements.

Collins and Gov. John Baldacci have also personally spoken with Dirk Kempthorne, who just began his stint as secretary of the Interior Department earlier this week. Both Collins and Baldacci urged Kempthorne to

consider funding the project.

Officials with the Department of the Interior could not be reached for comment Wednesday evening.

Signed in June 2004, the river restoration agreement was an unprecedented pact between conservation groups, government agencies and a dam owner to revive the Penobscot's decimated stocks of sea-run fish.

Federal officials, including former Interior Secretary Gale Norton, have described the deal as a national model of "cooperative conservation."

The agreement calls for the demolition of the PPL dam in Veazie and its Great Works dam in Old Town, as well as construction of an innovative fishway at the Howland Dam. That would open up 500 miles of river for salmon, shad, sturgeon and other migratory fish. In return, PPL can increase its generation capacity at other dams and will not face relicensing opposition from the groups.

The initial \$25 million would only pay to buy the dams. Demolition, construction of the bypass and other improvements are estimated to cost another \$25 million.

Laura Rosé Day, executive director of the river trust, said the landmark agreement was possible only because all of the groups worked together. That same spirit of teamwork will be

needed to pay for the massive project, she said in an interview after Wednesday's event.

Day said the challenge is convincing folks in Washington that using federal money to buy dams to protect a public resource — in this case, a river once famed for its fisheries — is no different from buying land in the name of conservation.

She also described the dam removal project as the best and easiest way to achieve the federal goal of restoring Maine's Atlantic salmon population.

"If the Bush administration wants to have this project shine as an example of how to get great thinking from the private and public sector and get tremendous environmental results, ... then the Bush administration has to make sure this project happens," Day said.

"The sooner we have the money, the sooner the dams come out," she later added.

Penobscot Nation Chief James Sappier said representatives of many other tribes initially thought the Penobscots were "nuts" for negotiating an agreement with so many disparate parties. Now he is convinced that the same cooperation can happen elsewhere.

"All of the tribes in the United States are watching this project," Sappier said. "All of the tribes want to know what is going on."