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Success on Kennebec bodes well for dam removal on Penobscot

Feds give \$6 million to help with Great Works project

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY JOHN CLARKE RUSS
Great Works dam is seen from the Bradley side of the Penobscot River on Tuesday. Maine will receive \$6.1 million for the dam's demolition.

AUGUSTA, Maine — In the weeks leading up to the historic breaching of the Edwards Dam, there was little doubt that striped bass, sturgeon and salmon would eventually return to the Kennebec River north of Maine's capital city.

The only question was how long it would take for sea-run fish to reclaim those 17 miles of free-flowing river after more than 160 years of obstruction.

Fishermen quickly got their answer.

“As soon as the dam was breached, we were catching striped bass up to Waterville,” Trout Unlimited's Jeff Reardon said Tuesday while

standing near the site of the former dam.

The removal of Augusta's Edwards Dam 10 years ago today and the subsequent recovery of the lower Kennebec has been hailed as a national precedent for river restoration.

But that success story on the Kennebec could pale in comparison to what many observers believe they will see when three Penobscot River dams are removed or bypassed in the near future.

As part of that restoration effort, federal agencies announced Tuesday that Maine will receive \$6.1 million in stimulus money to help finance the removal of the Great Works dam on the Penobscot.

“It's just a fraction of what will happen in the Penobscot with the size of the watershed and the amount of habitat that will be reopened,” said Patrick Keliher, director of the Bureau of Sea-Run Fisheries and Habitat with the Maine Department of Marine Resources.

Tuesday's commemoration on the banks of the Kennebec was not nearly as dramatic as the scene on July 1, 1999. Back then, an estimated 1,000 people cheered as a backhoe dug a hole in the 162-year-old dam, unleashing a trickle and then a torrent of muddy water downstream.

It's beneath the surface of the Kennebec, however, where arguably the most significant events have unfolded during the past decade.

In addition to stripers, shad have returned in large numbers to the Kennebec, giving rise to another highly marketable recreational fishery. Atlantic sturgeon and their smaller cousins, the shortnose sturgeon, which is listed as an endangered species, are also being spotted in ever-increasing numbers.

And while no alewives or river herring could be found above Edwards Dam 10 years ago, DMR biologists at the Benton Falls dam stopped counting earlier this spring at around 1.3 million alewives.

“If we just give nature an opportunity, just give her a chance to bring back a river, she will,” said Brownie Carson, executive director of the Natural Resources Council of Maine, one of the groups heavily involved in the effort to remove the dam.

Demolition of the Edwards Dam reopened 17 miles of river habitat to fish. The Penobscot project, by comparison, will give salmon, shad and other sea-run fish access to nearly 1,000 miles of watershed.

Federal regulators are reviewing the Penobscot River Restoration Trust’s application to purchase the Great Works, Veazie and Howland dams from PPL Corp. for \$25 million. The coalition members that are part of the trust are now working to raise an additional \$25 million to remove the Veazie and Great Works dams and by-pass the Howland dam.

The \$6 million in federal money announced Tuesday will go toward that latter phase.

Laura Rose Day, the trust’s executive director, said the Edwards Dam project has provided a decade of evidence that dam removal can rebuild fisheries when done right. It also paved the way for the much more ambitious — and complicated — Penobscot project.

“It’s inspiring,” Day said after Tuesday’s event. “It demonstrates that it is technically feasible. It’s proof that the worst-case scenarios haven’t happened.”

There was no mention during Tuesday’s ceremonies of federal officials’ recent decision to add Atlantic salmon in the Penobscot, Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers to the endangered species list. That decision was praised by many environmental and conservation groups, including Trout Unlimited, but was pilloried by state officials and industries operating along Maine’s three largest rivers.

Less than a dozen sea-run salmon have been observed returning to the Kennebec to spawn so far this year. Biologists working on the Penobscot, meanwhile, had counted 1,444 adult salmon as of Sunday. That is about 200 less than last year at this time but still well above the total annual returns for every other year since 1996.

Several observers said Tuesday that while Kennebec salmon continue to struggle 10 years later, they expressed strong optimism that the Penobscot’s much stronger salmon population would flourish after the dams are down — just as shad, stripers and other sea-run fish have in the Kennebec.

Waterville angler Ken “Snapper” Cashman was among those who watched the Edwards Dam come down 10 years ago. On Tuesday, the 78-year-old beamed as he talked about fishing for striped bass about 1 ½ miles from his home.

Standing in a park that used to be the site of a former mill tied to the old dam, Cashman called the dam removal “the best thing that ever happened” to the river.

“This is great, and it’s going to get better every year,” he said.

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