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US aid targeted for Penobscot River, land conservation

US aid may preserve huge Maine tract

By Beth Daley
GLOBE STAFF

The mighty Penobscot River and the thick blanket of forest surrounding it is legend in Maine. Its majestic salmon runs once lured fishermen from across the country; near its lower end, spruce fir stands and kettlehole bogs define one of the state's most unusual and striking landscapes.

Now the region is slated to receive \$13.25 million in federal funds to restore the Penobscot, where dams have prevented fish from swimming upstream, and to protect 24,500 acres of a remote swath of forest near Bangor that is threatened by development.

The money, in two separate line items, is part of the federal appropriations bill that President Bush was expected to sign before Christmas.

"It's fantastic to see both of these projects happening at the same time," said Deb Perkins, Maine projects director

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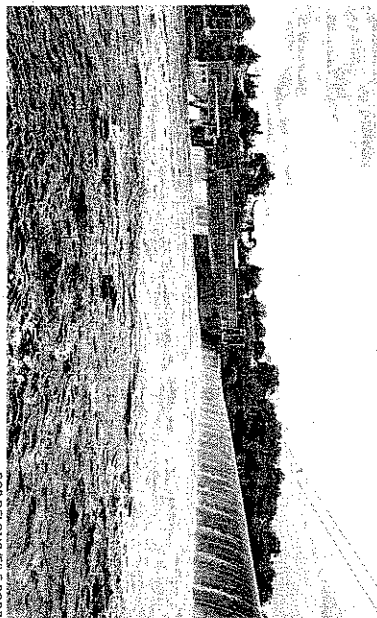
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for the Northern Forest Alliance, a nonprofit coalition of groups that work to protect the 26 million acres of the Northern Forest across northern New England and upstate New York. "It takes the long view to preserve our rural heritage and our connection to the river and woodlands."

About \$10 million of the appropriation will be paired with \$15 million already raised by a coalition of river-related organizations to purchase three dams on the Penobscot.

The two dams closest to the sea will be removed. A third, in Howland, will be decommissioned, and a fish passage will be built to allow salmon and shad returning to the river from the sea to bypass the dam to get upstream.

The dam purchase is a cornerstone of one of the largest river restoration projects in North America along the approximately 350-mile Penobscot. PPL Maine, which owns eight dams on the river, conservation groups, the Penobscot Nation, and federal and state agencies have been working for seven years to allow the same amount of hydropower to be produced while reopening the river and its tributaries to 11 species of fish. PPL will ultimately be allowed to increase power at six



BOB DELONG/FILE 2003

The Veazie Dam, near Bangor, would be one of two dams removed in a Penobscot River fish restoration project if President Bush signs off on a pending appropriations bill.

dams to compensate for the loss of power at the other three.

"The Penobscot Indian people, whose homeland includes the Penobscot River Watershed, have waited patiently for many years to see the once great fishery runs of the Penobscot restored," said Chief Kirk Francis of the Penobscot Indian Nation. It is, he said, "as good a Christmas present as we could have hoped for."

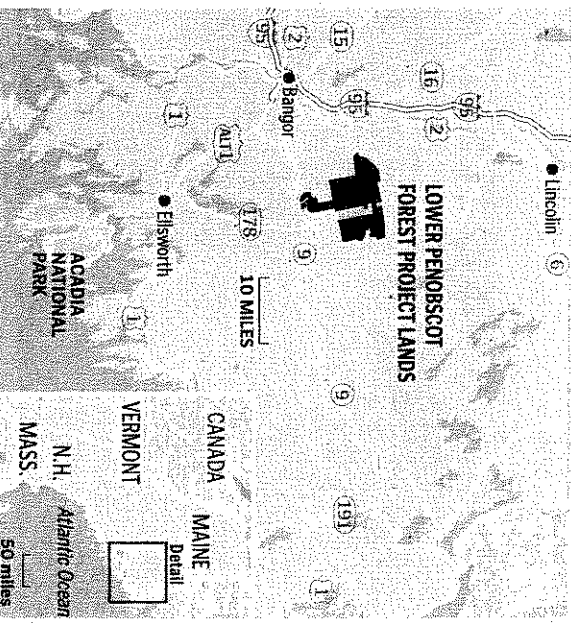
The remaining \$3.25 million of the federal funds will go to protect 24,500 acres in an area the US Forest Service recently declared one of the country's most threatened by development. That tract of central and eastern Maine land, known as the

Lower Penobscot Forest, begins about 15 miles northeast of Bangor.

The region hosts one of the last trout strongholds in the state, and on sections of the Union River, which runs through it, people can paddle canoes for miles without seeing any other sign of humans.

The money will go to buy development rights from landowner GMO Renewable Resources, meaning that the land can still be harvested for timber but will never be sold to build houses. The agreement also guarantees the public the right to use the land in perpetuity for hunting, fishing, and snowmobiling.

"This is great news," said Bruce Kidman of The Nature Conservancy in Maine, which brokered the deal and thanked GMO for taking the initiative to sell the rights. "If you look at a map, there is a road cutting through the prop-



SOURCES: The Nature Conservancy; ESRI, TeleAtlas
DAN O'Rourke/GLOBE STAFF

erty; there are a lot of for sale and subdivision signs," Kidman said. "It needs to be protected."

Once, the vast forests of Maine were owned by the same timber barons for generations.

But beginning in the 1990s, millions of acres went on the auction block. While most of the land was sold to other timber companies, some was subdivided and sold for houses, sparking fears of conservationists and state officials that Maine's vast woods would be fragmented. Bears, moose, and scores of other species in the region need large swaths of such land to flourish, and the private holdings are used by fishermen and hikers who treat it as a vast public park.

The 24,500 protected acres will become part of a much larger swath of protected lands in the Lower Penobscot Forest. Ultimately, conservation groups want to create a belt of conserved lands from Bangor to Acadia National Park.

"I grew up on the edge of this forest, and I knew there was only one paved road between my parents' house and Canada," said Alan Stearns, deputy director of the Bureau of Parks and Lands at the Maine Department of Conservation. "Projects like these mean future generations will have that same vast expanse of forest."

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