

Conservationists score victory in Maine

The dismantling of a 162-year-old dam will open the upper stretches of the Kennebec River for sea-run fish.

AUGUSTA, Maine — A foot-long sturgeon leaps from the rippling water and arches into the air just below a dam on the Kennebec River, almost as if marking the site where history will soon be made.

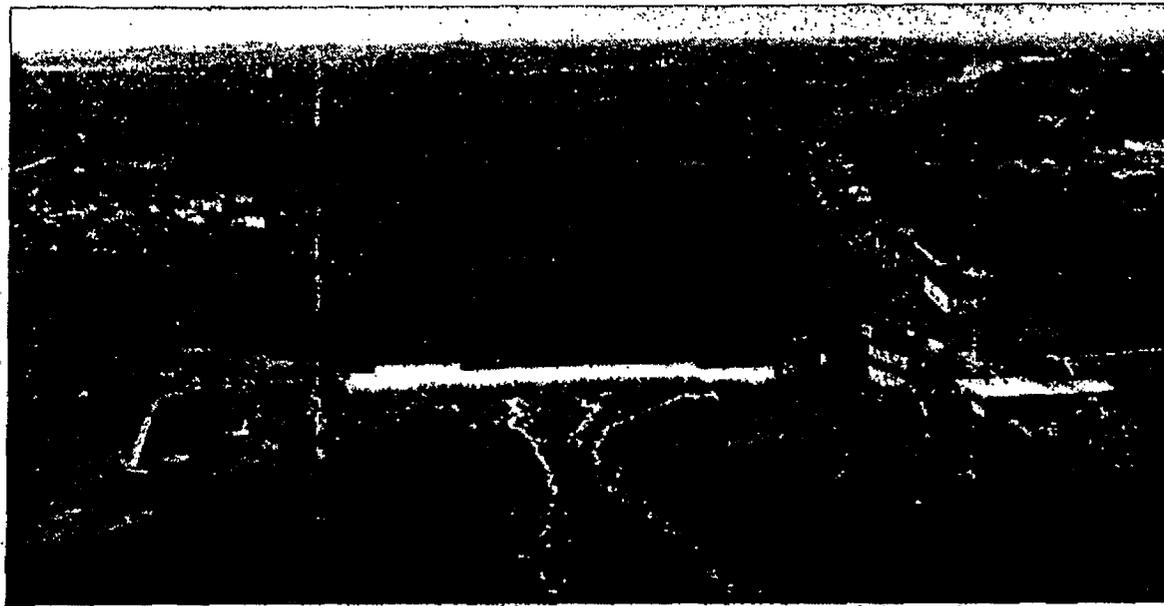
On Thursday, water will gush through an opening cut in the 162-year-old Edwards Dam, which has blocked Atlantic tomcod, shortnose sturgeon and other sea-run fish from upper stretches of the Kennebec since Henry David Thoreau was writing about Walden.

U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt plans to attend the dam opening, an event long awaited by conservationists and anglers.

The entire 19-foot-high structure will be dismantled and removed by Thanksgiving, creating "potentially the strongest sea-run fishery in the eastern United States," says Maine Planning Director John Richert.

Dams have been taken out in other states, including North Carolina, California and Oregon, but the 917-foot-wide Edwards Dam, which produced a small amount of electricity, was the first ordered removed against an owner's wishes.

In 1997, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ordered Edwards Manufacturing Co., owners of the dam, not only to tear it down but also to pay for the removal and restoration, reasoning that Edwards had profited from a public waterway for generations. Edwards challenged



THE 162-YEAR-OLD Edwards Dam in Augusta, Maine, will be dismantled and removed this week.

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the order and threatened to sue.

But in May 1998, Edwards agreed to give the dam and adjacent riverside acreage to the state, which accepted responsibility for the removal and cleanup as long as it was privately funded.

Bath Iron Works, a U.S. Navy contractor 25 miles downriver, is contributing \$2.5 million to help offset the environmental impact of its expansion onto nine acres of wetlands. And owners of several dams upstream agreed to pay \$4.75 million in exchange for delays in the required installation of fish passages along the Kennebec and some of its tributaries.

Removal of the Edwards Dam is expected to cost about \$5 million. Any money left over from Bath and the dams' contributions will be combined with public funds to restore several migratory fish

species to the river.

Steve Brooke, leader of a coalition that worked for the dam's removal, points to spots where increasing numbers of sturgeon, salmon and other species have been seen in recent weeks, almost as if they know the dam is coming down.

"They've all been waiting," Brooke says. "These rivers are so productive, if we give them a chance."

Sportfishing and conservation groups, including the Atlantic Salmon Federation, Trout Unlimited and American Rivers, have been pushing for dam removal since then-Gov. John McKernan first proposed it a decade ago.

As the plan picked up momentum, support appeared from far-flung quarters. In 1992, actor Richard Dysart, who starred in the TV show "L.A. Law," re-

turned to his hometown and clambered into a fishing boat to make a sentimental pitch to tear down a dam muscled into place by Irish and French-Canadian immigrants in the 1830s.

In that era before heavy machinery, workers with hand tools bolted together huge timber cribs, filled them with rock ballast and covered them with pine planks, stone and later concrete. For generations, the dam powered a riverside cotton mill and its electricity later was sold to a regional power company.

The structure has been modified and patched many times, especially after floods that breached it as recently as 1974.

The last few weeks have been spent preparing the site for the dam's removal. Truckloads of dirt and gravel have been dumped into the Kennebec to make a temporary coffer dam just behind the 60-foot section of the dam that will be breached.

A few minutes after 9 a.m. Thursday, the coffer dam will be broken. If all goes as expected, a surge of upstream water will sweep away the coffer dam and gush through the gap in Edwards.

"I think it will take seconds rather than minutes," says Terry Peacock of E-PRO, an engineering firm hired for the project. "They go pretty quick."

The dam is about 40 miles upriver from the sea, and the hour of the breaching was chosen for mid-tide so the sudden rush of water will be least disruptive to boaters and anyone near the lower stretches of the river.

Peacock says he expects the water level above the dam to drop eight feet within a day of the dam's removal then gradually ebb further as the river settles into a new, natural flow.

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