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Saving Salmon

Conservationists and business interests are at loggerheads so often these days that it is heartening when they can reach an agreement that produces good outcomes for both — and for the environment as well.

A coalition of environmental groups, an Indian tribe, government agencies and a power company recently announced an agreement that could help save wild Atlantic salmon, which are now on the endangered species list. Two dams on Maine's Penobscot River will be torn down and a third decommissioned, opening up more than 500 miles of river for fish returning to spawn. In exchange, PPL, the power company, will receive cash and the right to increase power generation at other dams that pose less threat to fish migration.

Apart from helping the fish, conservationists also hope that the deal will restore momentum to the idea of removing dams whose environmental damage outweighs their usefulness as generators of electricity. That idea took hold in 1997 when the federal government ordered the destruction of another Maine dam, on the Kennebec River, leading eventually to the removal of more than 100 dams elsewhere. Dam removal was vigorously supported by President Bill Clinton's secretary of the interior, Bruce Babbitt, who actually kept a sledgehammer in his office that he would carry around with him to decommissioning ceremonies.

Though it blessed last week's agreement, the Bush administration has not shown the same enthusiasm for removing dams or, for that matter, saving salmon. In August, hoping to polish up his environmental credentials, Mr. Bush visited Washington State to claim credit for an upsurge in the number of salmon returning to the Lower Snake River. The main reason for salmon recovery in the Pacific Northwest is a cyclical improvement in ocean conditions, not Mr. Bush. Indeed, his administration has fallen short of targets required under a plan inherited from the Clinton administration for improving salmon habitats and water quality. Wild salmon are still well below the levels necessary to ensure their long-term survival, and a judge has ordered the entire rescue plan redone.

Saving the salmon of the Pacific Northwest will require a major political commitment and may yet require the removal of four Snake River dams far larger than any on the Penobscot. But it is enough, for now, to celebrate Maine's encouraging example.