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Wáhsehtək^w Land Return Effort

Applying Organization	Penobscot Indian Nation	Application Date	5/14/2026
Applying Contact	Charles Loring	Status	Submitted
Record Type	Member Collective	Created By	Charles Loring, 5/14/2026, 5:15 PM
		Create Account	<input type="checkbox"/>

Project Overview

Project Name	Wáhsehtək ^w Land Return Effort	Requested Amount	\$50,000.00
Project/Campaign Name	Wáhsehtək ^w Land Return Effort		
Type of Project	Acquisition; Restoration	Project Multiple Locations	
Project Location (State or Territory)	ME	Longitude	-68.69194930969032
Latitude	45.85686016175706		

Organization Details

Organization Name	Penobscot Nation	Primary address for organization	12 Wabanaki Way Old Town, Maine 04468 United States
Contact Name	Charles Loring, Jr.	Contact Title	Director, Department of Natural Resources
Contact Email Address	charlie.loring.jr@penobscotnation.org		
Annual Operating Budget	\$1,800,000.00	Tax Status/Organization Type	None of the Above
Staff Size	200	Main Phone	207.817.7331
Total Membership	2,398	Organization Website/Social Media Feed	https://www.penobscotnation.org/departments/departments-of-natural-resources/
BIPOC-led	Yes	C-Suite Staff	Federally Recognized Tribe

Grant Details

Awarded Amount		Awarded Date	
Funding Program			
Primary Project Type		Secondary Project Type	
Term Start Date		Term End Date	

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization	Penobscot Nation, or Penawahpkekeyak “the people of the place of the white rocks,” is a federally recognized Tribal	Location Details	Wáhsehtək ^w (pronounced “WAH-seh-teg”) refers to the East Branch of the Penobscot River and the surrounding
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Nation and one of the oldest continuously operating democratic governments in the world. For over 11,000 years, the Penobscot people have lived in and cared for the Penobscot River watershed, which remains central to Penobscot culture, governance, and identity. Today, the Nation owns and stewards approximately 120,000 acres, just 2.2% of its ancestral homeland, through its 21-person Department of Natural Resources, which integrates Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Western science to manage lands, waters, wildlife, and forests.

The mission of the Penobscot Nation's administration is to protect Penobscot people, culture, and territory through the wise exercise of sovereign powers; to promote prosperity through economic and cultural opportunity; and to preserve cultural values entrusted by ancestors for future generations.

lands within the heart of the Penobscot River watershed. The Wáhsehtək^w landscape includes nearly 30,000 acres of forestland, wetlands, ponds, and headwater streams. These lands contain 53 miles of streams and more than 4,600 acres of wetlands critical to the ecological health of the watershed and to culturally important subsistence species such as Atlantic salmon, brook trout, moose, and brown ash.

The Wáhsehtək^w lands are located just north of Millinocket and adjacent to existing Penobscot Nation lands and immediately south of Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument and southeast of Baxter State Park, forming a unique and highly connected mosaic of over 1 million acres of Tribal, nonprofit, federal, and state conserved lands. This landscape sits within one of the most intact forested regions in the eastern United States and serves as an important climate resilient stronghold for biodiversity.

Returning Wáhsehtək^w to Penobscot Nation's care restores access to lands that were forcibly taken in the 18th and 19th centuries, reconnecting Penobscot citizens to places essential for hunting, fishing, gathering medicines, cultural materials, and practicing land based traditions. The project also enables vitally needed southern public access to Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument from nearby communities, including Millinocket and East Millinocket, benefiting the broader region. This creates a unique opportunity for Indigenous-centered storytelling and ecotourism along the road from Millinocket to the Monument in the future.

Final Success The 30,000-acre Wáhsehtək^w land return effort is a historic partnership between Penobscot Nation and Trust for Public Land that will bring Penobscot Nation's climate-resilient homelands back into their care and stewardship—including expansive forests, 53 miles of streams, and over 4,600 acres of wetlands—while strengthening Tribal sovereignty and cultural connection to the land and enhancing a mosaic of over 1 million acres of connected, protected lands.

Impact on Climate and Bioversity

Wáhsehtək^w is a climate resilient landscape with exceptional capacity to support biodiversity as temperatures and precipitation patterns shift. The property lies within a largely unfragmented northern forest that provides critical north-south migration corridors for wildlife adapting to climate change. According to climate connectivity analyses, the landscape demonstrates above average local connectedness and resilience, meaning it can sustain ecological function and species movement under changing climate conditions.

Protecting Wáhsehtək^w will conserve cold-water streams, wetlands, and intact forests that serve as climate refugia for fish, amphibians, birds, and wide ranging mammals. These features help moderate flooding, reduce erosion, store carbon, and maintain water quality throughout the Penobscot River watershed. A carbon assessment estimates that the

land will sequester approximately 810,000 metric tons of CO₂e over 40 years.

Connectivity is a defining strength of this project. Wáhsehtək^w directly links Penobscot Nation lands with Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, state managed lands, and other conserved forest holdings, contributing to a connected landscape of more than one million acres. Under Penobscot Nation stewardship, land management will prioritize habitat restoration, sustainable forestry, culvert upgrades, and stream connectivity improvements that further strengthen ecological resilience across the region.

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

The return of Wáhsehtək^w will generate meaningful economic and recreational benefits for both Penobscot Nation and surrounding Katahdin region communities. For the Nation, expanded land stewardship supports sustainable forestry practices projected to generate ongoing revenue and employment opportunities, while increased access to subsistence species strengthens food sovereignty and reduces economic vulnerability for Tribal citizens.

For the broader region, the project will create new southern access to Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, long identified as a critical need by local communities, the National Park Service, and Penobscot Nation. Improved access is expected to increase visitation, support outdoor recreation based businesses, and contribute to economic revitalization in Millinocket and nearby towns, enhancing the area's reputation as a gateway to the North Woods. Recent National Park Service data show that Monument visitors already generate millions of dollars annually in local spending, and new access will significantly expand these benefits.

Outdoor recreation opportunities on and adjacent to Wáhsehtək^w will include hiking, paddling, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, and culturally informed outdoor experiences. Penobscot Nation will manage access to balance public use with stewardship, safety, and long term conservation values. A community request that has already been achieved is the placement of a recreational easement on a key snowmobile trail through the property that serves as an important linkage within Maine's statewide snowmobile network.

Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

Trust for Public Land (TPL) pre acquired the Wáhsehtək^w property in December 2022 using bridge financing, allowing immediate protection from subdivision, intensive harvesting, or sale to private timber interests. Now, project partners are fundraising to pay back the loans and transfer the land to Penobscot Nation. The project is structured in multiple phases, with an initial transfer of approximately 11,000 acres to Penobscot Nation planned for Fall 2026, followed by subsequent transfers that complete the return of nearly 30,000 acres. Extensive due diligence, including updated appraisals, environmental site assessments, surveys, and title work, is underway or complete. Tribal Council approval and a vote of the full Tribal membership have authorized the acquisition, and the goal is to put the land into Trust status, a process that supports the Tribe's sovereignty and enhances federal protections. To date, we have raised \$20.5 million toward our \$32.5 million goal. Of the remaining \$12 million left to raise, we anticipate \$6 million from the North American Wetlands Conservation Act Fund (NAWCA) and the final \$6 million from private funding. We hope to complete our fundraising campaign by January 2027 and transfer the land by the end of 2028, when NAWCA funding will be distributed.

Penobscot Nation's Department of Natural Resources will manage the land under the Nation's Comprehensive Land Use Management Plan and Forest Management Plan, integrating Traditional Ecological Knowledge with Western science. Key activities include sustainable forest management, habitat restoration, stream and culvert improvements, access planning, and coordination with the National Park Service on road maintenance. Penobscot Nation is already stewarding the land and planning for restoration projects while the land is under temporary ownership by TPL. Members of a Wabanaki women's group and

Wabanaki Youth In Science planted a medicine plant trail to support indigenous medicinal practices and the restoration of native plants.

Potential challenges include the scale of funding required and the time sensitive nature of retiring acquisition loans.

Federal funding has been a challenge to secure as the new administration has limited funding opportunities and, in some cases, eliminated them. In 2023, USDA awarded funds to TPL from the Farm Services Agency's (FSA) Increasing Land, Capital, and Market Access Program, \$3,038,875 of which would have supported the Wáhsehtək^w project. However, the USDA's recent termination of the FSA grants has created an approximate \$3 million gap in Phase 1 funding, which we are actively and urgently trying to fill.

We have significant concerns that if this first transfer of land does not occur on the timeline as

planned, we will erode the trust and momentum that we have built with tribal citizens, funders, and other nonprofits and Tribal Nations that are inspired by this project as a model for what's possible.

Support from The Conservation Alliance will help advance the first phase of land return, leverage additional public and private funding, and maintain momentum toward full project completion by 2027–2028.

Engagement from The Conservation Alliance's member companies helps demonstrate broad, values-driven support for Indigenous-led conservation and land return in general. Business community support strengthens the project's ability to attract additional public and private funding, amplifies awareness among outdoor recreation audiences, and reinforces the connection between conserved landscapes, healthy communities, and sustainable outdoor economies. Sharing this project with customers and community signals that protecting places like Wáhsehtək^w benefits the Tribe, local communities, and the outdoor industry nationwide. We appreciate every business helping to amplify this project and attract donors and supporters to our cause.

Key Decision Makers

Wáhsehtək^w has full support from the Penobscot Nation Tribal Council, Tribal membership, TPL leadership, and the National Park Service. While no legislation is needed to put the land into Penobscot Nation's ownership, legislation is required to expand the boundaries of the National Monument to allow the National Park Service to acquire the roads. The Maine congressional delegation supports the effort, and Senator Angus King has been a champion for advancing support in the Senate, along with Congressman Jared Golden in the House of Representatives, for the Katahdin Woods and Waters Access Act, which would allow the National Park Service to manage and service the road through the property to the National Monument. Penobscot Nation has an existing government-to-government relationship and General Agreement with the National Park Service that supports co-stewardship and collaboration. Community and local support are evidenced by supportive town votes from surrounding communities, letters from local business owners, snowmobile clubs, and Maine guides.

Working With Business Community

Elevate Voices This project is led by Penobscot Nation and rooted in community based decision-making. All major decisions have been approved by Tribal Council, and the full Tribal membership voted to authorize acquisition of the land. From the start, Penobscot Nation determined what funding sources and restrictions and management requirements they were comfortable with, to ensure that their sovereignty was upheld. Once acquired, Penobscot Nation and the Department of Natural Resources will fold this land into their broader land management framework, which prioritizes the health of the forest and water above all else. Their management practice incorporates Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Western science to provide the highest level of care for their lands.

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes Over the next year, we hope to:

- Complete due diligence, transfer and permanently protect approximately 11,000 acres of Wáhsehtək^w in Phase 1.
- Conserve 20+ miles of streams and associated wetlands within the Phase 1 acquisition area and implement sustainable forest management and stewardship planning for newly returned lands.
- Secure the remaining \$12 million in funding needed to complete the full project and advance the return of all 30,000 acres of land to Penobscot Nation.
- Expand access for Penobscot citizens to culturally important lands for subsistence, ceremony, and education

TCA Funding Plan Support from TCA will directly advance the first phase of returning Wáhsehtək^w to Penobscot Nation by helping close the funding gap for the initial land transfer. TCA funding will also leverage additional public and private investments, maintain project momentum, and demonstrate strong business community support for Indigenous led conservation. This support helps ensure that a globally significant, climate resilient landscape is permanently protected and stewarded by the people who have cared for it since time immemorial.

Confidential Items Nothing is confidential and you are welcome to share

Other Relevant Application Details Thank you for your support and consideration!
