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APS dam removal releases Fossil Creek Central Ariz. plant closures let stream flow again

By Mary Jo Pitzl
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FOSSIL CREEK - It started as a trickle, a small finger of water stretching across a sunbaked slab of granite.

But it had the force of a flood, heralding a historic event and the beginning of a new era for this central Arizona stream.

At high noon Saturday, Arizona Public Service Co. abandoned the dam that has held back Fossil Creek for nearly a century and let the water flow unabated.

It marks the first time in anyone's memory that an Arizona dam has been taken out of commission in the name of restoring a river. On Fossil Creek, the water had been diverted to power two hydroelectric plants run by APS.

"This represents a watershed event," said Andrew Fahlund, vice president for protection and restoration at American Rivers, a conservation group. "To do something like this in Arizona is extraordinary."

It's extraordinary for a number of reasons, as speaker after speaker said during a creekside ceremony that marked APS' retirement of the Childs and Irving hydroelectric-power plants northwest of Payson.

"This is just another benchmark in the long history of Fossil Creek," said Jack Davis, president and chief executive officer of APS. When future generations

come to Fossil Creek, he said, "they'll remember that short period of time - 100 years - when Fossil Creek was used for economic development."

"APS gave Fossil Creek a gem," said Duane Shroufe, director of the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

The creek is one of the few perennial streams in Arizona, running even on hot summer days. The water is rich in calcium carbonate, which will grow into travertine formations under the force of the increased water flow, creating pools and basins reminiscent of those found at Havasu Falls.

Hiking enthusiasts will have a 14-mile waterway to follow on hikes along the tree-lined stream, and wildlife is expected to be drawn to the once-again flowing creek.

Fossil Creek also is on the brink of becoming a prime spot for native fish, such as the humpback chub, the speckled dace and the longfin minnow.

State and federal fishery officials airlifted native fish to ponds along the creek last fall, and the ensuing months have been productive.

"There's lots of little fish that spawned," reported Dave Weedman, an aquatic-habitat specialist with Game and Fish.

But don't grab your fishing pole just yet. Game and Fish wants to give the fish at

least two years to establish a healthy population before opening the area to anglers.

Saturday's event was highlighted by Davis and representatives of six other groups flipping a symbolic switch to turn "off" the dam.

This triggered dam operators to open the gates on the dam, several miles upstream. Two hours later, the first trickles of Fossil Creek flow reached the grounds of the Irving power plant. Plant operators figured it would take four hours for the full force of the 43 cubic-foot-per-second flow to reach the plant, and estimated it would raise the creek 10 inches.

Davis said the shutdown of the only two hydropower plants in its network wouldn't cause a ripple in APS' power supply. Combined, the plants were producing less than 1 percent of APS' total electricity.

The return of water to Fossil Creek came about through an unusual alliance between the utility company, various environmental organizations and the Yavapai-Apache Nation.

In 1999, APS decided to drop plans to recommission the power plants.

Tribal Chairman Jamie Fullmer fought back tears as he contemplated the significance of Saturday's event.

"To us, water is sacred," Fullmer said. "And with the water now flowing, it will bring back a new energy to our community in the Verde Valley and to Arizona."

Just as the power plants were key to Arizona development, their decommissioning also plays a big role, he said.

The Childs plant was built in 1909, Irving in 1916. Both were powered by an above-ground pipeline that channeled the force of Fossil Creek to produce power for central Arizona mining operations. Later, some of the power was directed to Payson and Phoenix.

Robin Silver of the Center for Biological Diversity put in a plug for the National Environmental Policy Act, which he said gave environmental groups the right to speak out against continued damming on the creek.

The law is currently the subject of congressional scrutiny, including a public meeting Saturday in Show Low.

"The two laws that made this happen are being destroyed," he said referring to NEPA and the Endangered Species Act, which protects the habitats of endangered plants and animals.

The creek's restoration puts more pressure on officials with the Coconino and Tonto national forests, where the creek runs, to manage the people that are expected to visit the area.

Long-term planning will start soon, said Nora Rasure, the Coconino superintendent. And in the short term, some hiking trails may be closed as APS deconstructs the power plants.

The utility plans to leave a section of the flume and one or two structures at the Irving plant; everything else, including a new temporary bridge, will be dismantled and removed.

Perhaps the looming threat to Fossil Creek is that it will be loved to death, proponents say.

But U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., plans to introduce legislation that would include Fossil Creek in the Wild and Scenic Rivers system, providing federal protection and dollars.