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Utility plans to remove dam

POCATELLO, Idaho (AP) -- A Utah-based utility will ask federal regulators for permission to remove an aging small dam on the Bear River in Idaho, a move that environmentalists say will help improve dwindling numbers of Bonneville cutthroat trout.

The Cove Dam near the southeastern Idaho community of Grace is expected to be removed next year pending approval by the agency that licenses privately operated dams, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

A dam removal agreement was signed Wednesday in Pocatello between the utility and various groups and agencies, including the Shoshone-Bannock Indian tribe, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

The 1.7 megawatt dam, the smallest of four on the Bear River in Idaho, was built in 1917 and supplies only a fraction of the annual power produced by PacifiCorp, which operates as Utah Power in Idaho and Utah.

"This was an older project that was largely in disrepair," Monte Garrett, PacifiCorp program manager, told the Idaho State Journal newspaper. "We were going to go back and do work on

it, but another alternative was retirement."

Conservation groups had urged the company to remove the dam to improve the Bear River's ecological health and improve habitat for the Bonneville cutthroat. Earlier this year, the Center for Biological Diversity, Pacific Rivers Council and Biodiversity Conservation Alliance filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Denver for force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the Bonneville cutthroat as a threatened or endangered species.

"This is a big deal for the Bear River," said Bill Sedivy, executive director of Idaho Rivers United. "I'm glad we were able to get past the emotional attachment of dams and pay attention to the science and get this done."

While environmentalists hailed the removal as a potential step toward the retirement of other dams in the West, PacifiCorp spokesman Dave Eskelsen said the utility's decision was also based on business considerations.

"As the demand for electricity has grown, hydro has become a smaller part, although it's still very valuable," he said. The four dams on the Bear River generate just 0.1 percent of PacifiCorp's overall energy production.