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San Francisco hydropower project gets an early OK

Written by Geoffrey Plant on February 23, 2021

Overruling concerns expressed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Arizona Game and Fish Department and the Center for Biological Diversity, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued a preliminary permit last week to the Pumped Hydro Storage company for a 200-foot-tall dam it wants to build on the San Francisco River.

The proposed dam would create a 10-mile-long finger lake on the San Francisco to provide water for a 3,400 annual gigawatt-hours hydroelectric project that would straddle the border between Catron County and Greenlee County, Arizona.

Pumped Hydro Storage projects need proximity to major transmission lines in order to buy cheap off-peak electricity they will use to pump water up to a reservoir — 1,500 feet above the San Francisco River, in this case. Then, when demand is high and it can sell the electricity back at a premium rate, it will use the same transmission lines to get the electricity back into the grid, letting the stored water power turbines as it's released back into the river.

The necessary transmission lines are already in place near the proposed project, although it's not clear whether an agreement exists yet between the dam company and the owners of the power line, Tucson Electric Power.

The Center for Biological Diversity argued that the proposed reservoir would eliminate critical habitats for several species and generally industrialize areas that the Forest Service, in a separate filing, said may be designated as protected under the federal Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Pumped Hydro Storage's application did not address that issue. The Forest Service also said the project could threaten a wilderness study area.

According to an FERC filing, however, the preliminary permit is not a green light.

‘A preliminary permit does not authorize a permittee to undertake construction of the proposed project,’ the Feb. 18 filing says. “The purpose of a preliminary permit is to study the feasibility of the project, including studying potential impacts. The proximity of a Wilderness Study Area does not prevent the Commission from issuing a preliminary permit. Additionally, the Forest Service is not opposed to the Commission issuing the permit, but rather requests the applicant consider any impacts on the Wilderness Study Area. Accordingly, the concerns raised in these comments are premature at the preliminary permit stage, in that they address the potential effects of constructing and operating the proposed project. Should the permittee file a license application, these issues will be addressed in the licensing process.”

The Center for Biological Diversity said in a statement that issuing even a preliminary permit for the project is “reckless.”

“It’s troubling that the commission would even consider allowing this reckless project to move forward,” said Taylor McKinnon, a senior campaigner at the Center. “The San Francisco River is a cradle of biodiversity and one of the last free-flowing rivers in the American Southwest. We won’t rest until this destructive industrialization plan is permanently shelved.”

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