

Studies about dam removal on track

Interior Secretary to make decision by 2012

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The process to determine whether removal of four Klamath River hydroelectric dams is feasible and the best way to improve the river's fisheries is on track.

About 60 people, including federal and state officials and stakeholders who participated in talks about the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, met Tuesday and Wednesday at the Shilo Inn in Klamath Falls to share progress and discuss collecting data and information on dam removal.

The Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement calls for U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to decide whether to remove the dams no later than March 30, 2012.

Those involved want everything on the Salazar's desk by late 2011.

"They're going to bust blood vessels to do it, but it will be done," said Glen Spain, northwest regional director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

The drought impacting the river's upper reaches this spring highlights the need to move quickly so the restoration agreement can be implemented, officials said.

But those involved in the decision process say they already have a lot of motivation.

"I don't think anything could lend more intensity to this process," said Larry Dunsmoor, fisheries biologist with the Klamath Tribes.

Dam removal is a key component of the restoration agreement, which seeks to resolve water conflicts in the Klamath River Basin watershed. Environmentalists, fishermen and tribes sought dam removal as a means to improve fisheries, including salmon runs, connected to the river.

Required research

The secretary requires a number of documents and various data to decide whether dam removal is appropriate.

One document looks at environmental, social, economic and related impacts of dam removal on the region. Another looks at the engineering aspects, how to take the dams down, in what order and how to deal with backed up sediment.

Another document ties the information together in a summary. Getting this done requires the collaboration of dozens of people.

"The real challenge is there are so many moving parts," Spain said.

Dennis Lynch, program manager for the Interior's efforts to study dam removal, said the process is on track. He credited the team of federal officials and others for getting to work and collecting the necessary information for the decision.

Sorting through data

It's too early to say whether the data will show dam removal as the best course of action. Sediment samples behind the dams still need to be analyzed, cost estimates for removal are not done and other impacts are still being measured.

There also will be reviews. The science behind the data must be peer-reviewed, and public meetings on some aspects are necessary. Some meetings are expected to start in late May or early June.

Energy to finish

But there is impetus behind the effort to get those answers, and many said the signing of the restoration agreement in late February has provided that energy.

“We just want to get to the point where we can say this is a good idea or a bad idea,” Lynch said.

Side Bars

Hydropower remains viable

Of the more than 300 Northwest region projects in some stage of Federal Energy Regulatory Committee licensing, three types of power generation are prevalent: hydro, natural gas and tidal.

Many hydroelectric projects propose to use existing Bureau of Reclamation dams, and in Klamath County, the Klamath Irrigation District has a permit to study revitalizing a hydro facility at the C Canal drop.

Dam removal

Even if dams are removed on the Klamath River, hydroelectric will remain a part of power generation in Oregon, said Ken Zimmerman, senior analyst with the Oregon Public Utility Commission.

“Oregon is not going to lose its position as a major hydro producer,” Zimmerman said.

Fish protection regulation will continue to be commonplace in hydro project renewals, suitable locations for dams will narrow and litigation will continue, Zimmerman predicted.

“I think dams are going to be litigated more than they have been,” he said. “A lot of lawyers are going to get wealthy.”

Klamath River dam removal surcharge

Pacific Power customers began seeing a surcharge for dam removal on their electric bills as of March 19, said Oregon Public Utility Commission spokesman Bob Valdez.

The 1.7 percent surcharge will be kept in an escrow account until the Public Utility Commission has a chance to examine feasibility studies submitted by Pacific Power. Valdez said the PUC has six months to determine whether dam removal is prudent for both the utility and its customers.

The commission will take public testimony and have a public hearing on dam removal, Valdez said. A date hasn't been set. People can submit comments to the PUC by e-mail at puc.commission@state.or.us, fax at 503-378-5505 or by postal mail at 550 Capitol St. NE, Salem, OR, 97301.

If the commission deems dam removal imprudent, Valdez said, surcharges collected from Oregon's Pacific Power customers would be refunded.

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