

# Congress considers powering down Detroit, Cougar dams

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**The North Santiam River below Big Cliff Dam near Mill City is known to steelhead anglers as the best spot for wrangling the fish.** STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

What would happen if the turbines at Detroit, Cougar and Big Cliff dams were turned off for good?

Since the 1950s, water passing through the dams has provided electricity for hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses throughout Oregon.

But the dams also have cut off native habitat for environmentally threatened species of fish like salmon and steelhead, preventing them from migrating up and down the North Santiam and McKenzie rivers.

In the past few years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the dams, has come under scrutiny from environmental groups and courts after missing benchmarks for providing passage for fish around the dams.

Now, Congress has ordered the Corps to study what would happen if those turbines were no longer in operation.

The Corps has made operational changes through the years in accordance with court orders, but turning off the turbines is something they can't do on their own. U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader said there are compromises to be found.

"The Corps, poor folks there get beat up on everything they try," U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader said. "The environmental community doesn't like anything, which I think is sad."

"We're trying to engage the environmental community, the fish community, the ag community, the municipal community in a more productive discussion going forward. I just don't see this ... as a zero-sum game. I think there's a way for all of those interests to be met to some degree, not entirely."

## To turn them off or leave them on

Producing power at the dams was authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1950, and it would take another act of Congress to turn them off. Last winter, the Corps agreed to shut off the turbines at Detroit Dam eight hours per day from November through February to aid fish passage.

At Cougar Dam, the Corps has been ordered to turn off the turbines at similar times this winter for the same purpose.

In a district court ruling handed down Tuesday by Judge Marco Hernandez in a lawsuit by environmental groups against the Corps, the Corps was ordered to use lower regulating outlets for temperature control purposes and lower elevation,

which will reduce the amount of electricity it can produce through the turbines.

Native Fish Society conservation director Jennifer Fairbrother said that the Corps has been hesitant to pursue such radical measures like turning off the turbines because of the congressional authorization.

"We got part of the way there with the system that we needed to, but we need to remove those constraints," Fairbrother said.

The primary purpose of the dams is flood control, but they're also authorized for navigation, irrigation and power production.

The Corps has operated under the goal of optimizing power production at the dams for years.

## 3 dams don't produce much power

The three dams produce a trickle compared to the amounts of electricity the dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers produce and sell to the Bonneville Power Administration.

Detroit produces 100 megawatt hours, Cougar produces 25 and Big Cliff produces 18.

Dams in the Columbia like John Day (2,160 megawatts), The Dalles (2,100) and Bonneville (558) produce far more because they have more turbines.

Bonneville combines it all and re-sells it to anyone needing power.

"It's a single system mix," Ted Case, executive director of the Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative Association, said. "You don't say, 'I want to get the power from Grand Coulee, I don't want to get it from Cougar.' We get it from Bonneville."

According to Oregon Utility Statistics, 31,085,346 megawatt hours were sold to retail customers in Oregon — including in-

vestor-owned utilities like Portland General Electric and Pacific Power, municipal customers like Monmouth and co-ops like Salem Electric and Consumers Power Inc.

The electricity produced in the Willamette River basin, including from Detroit and Cougar, cost \$30.07 per megawatt hour in 2020 to produce, according to a federal assessment, while the power from other hydroelectric sources the BPA purchases from costs \$12 per megawatt hour.

Those Willamette River basin prices are going to increase in the coming years, too, to cover increased costs to help the threatened fish species.

The most recent estimates by the Corps of Engineers, in 2018, was it would cost \$100 million to \$250 million to construct the fish passage and temperature control tower it proposed at Detroit Dam to come into compliance with the 2008 BiOp, a legal settlement and long-term salmon recovery plan.

Those costs mean the Corps and BPA are on the hook to help fund fish passage and other measures to ensure the survival of fish species at the dams.

"They share costs across the Willamette Valley project," Corps spokesperson Tom Conning said.

## Different sides in agreement

Environmental groups and power companies don't always agree about issues, especially when it comes to dams.

But in this case, they do.

Environmental groups say turning the turbines off would benefit threatened species like Upper Willamette River Chinook Salmon and steelhead, which were listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act in 1999, by increasing downstream passage, water quality and flows.

With the turbines off and water levels lower, fish would be able to pass downstream more easily and have a greater chance of survival.

"At Cougar, we believe that could be a long term way of successfully providing better migration of juvenile fish in a way that is more efficient than collecting the fish and trucking them around the reservoir," Fairbrother said.

The Corps has frequently argued in court it lacked the authority to stop producing power at the dams as it was required by the 1950 congressional authorization to produce power.

But in recent rulings, Hernandez said that argument is faulty and the power generation authorization is flexible when it is harmful to the survival of fish species.

"We've had a lot of conversations with

the Bonneville Power Administration, and I think they have come to the conclusion that the power is not perhaps as important to their mission across the grid," Schrader said.

"They have other hydroelectric sources that are probably more important and they're trying obviously to work closely with the different states, including Oregon, in the fish passage issue, and frankly they're on the hook for a lot of the fish passage stuff."

## Unseen risks of shutoffs

But even with that consensus, eliminating electricity production at the dams may not be as straightforward as it sounds. The current system does have some benefits.

Conning describes a few cities as being "islanded" with a dam.

In other words, a city like Blue River is set up to use Cougar Dam as a backup electricity source in an emergency.

And the electricity produced at the Willamette Basin dams is needed most at peak times, such as early in the morning and in the early evening.

"The power in the Willamette Valley is kind of the grid stability, and the ability to generate when there's more need to generate with the grid," Conning said.

But Congress may not give them the option.

## But will it happen?

The Corps expects to send the preliminary report to the Assistant Secretary of the Army and the Regional Integration Team by the end of 2021, according to Conning.

After their feedback, the Corps will submit its final report in 60-90 days to Congress to meet the January 2023 deadline.

Among the items the Corps has to report about are how deauthorization would impact the project, including operations, compliance with the Endangered Species Act, costs and studies of the system.

After that, Congress could vote to keep the turbines spinning or to turn them off.

"We're all trying to give a little," Schrader said. "Climate change is real, and we're going to have to figure out what do we need to do, but I think eliminating the power requirements there might be a big, big step of breaking some of the logjam and showing folks that we can actually work together and we have common interests."

*Bill Poehler covers Marion County for the Statesman Journal. Contact him at [bpoebler@statesmanjournal.com](mailto:bpoebler@statesmanjournal.com) or [Twitter.com/bpoebler](https://twitter.com/bpoebler).*

## Karen Koehler

**STAYTON** - Karen was born on March 28, 1950, to Bryce and Betty Hecht in Silverton, OR. Both of whom preceded her in death. Karen graduated from Silverton High School and was the 1967-68 homecoming queen. After graduating, she went right to work and spent most of her years working in human resources. She met her husband Gary in high school and in 1971 they married and spent 50 years together. Karen enjoyed watching her daughters compete in softball, basketball, and volleyball. She traveled all over Oregon, Washington, and California to watch them play softball on travelling teams. After the girls left home, she enjoyed going camping and fly-fishing with her husband, along with watching her grandchildren play soccer, volleyball, football, basketball, and baseball.

Karen Koehler passed away peacefully on September 30, 2021, surrounded by her 3 daughters and her husband. Karen is survived by her husband Gary, daughters: Kristin May, Erin Fergus, and Jody Koehler, her brother Darryl Hecht, 5 grandchildren, and 1 great-granddaughter. Karen asked that no service be held in her honor. However, anyone wishing to make donations, may make it out to the Silverton Alumni Association.

## Phyllis Kay Burk

**SILVERTON** - Phyllis Kay Burk, born September 10, 1933 in Brooklyn New York, died September 19, 2021 in Silverton, Oregon at the age of 88. She was preceded in death by her husband Oliver Wendell Burk and sons Terry and David. She is survived by son Steven (Cindy) Burk of Silverton, son Mark (Lisa) Burk of Silverton, daughter Lorraine (Rick) Bergerson of Henderson Nevada, daughter Joanne (Stuart) Hartley of Silverton, son Glenn (Joni) Burk of Beaverton Oregon, along with 25 grandchildren and 48 great grandchildren.



Phyllis spent most of her early years in Southern California. After starting their family in California, they moved to the Drakes Crossing area in the Silverton Hills, where Wendell operated a small market and Phyllis worked for the state of Oregon.

Phyllis had many friends, from her church The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, T.O.P.S. Volunteering at the Silverton Hospital, and the Silverton Hills community. She loved serving people in whatever they needed. Her favorite thing was getting together with as many families and friends as possible enjoying a great meal, laughter and storing telling.

There was a small graveside service held with family on October 1, with a celebration of life to be held at a later date. Assisting the Family is Unger Funeral Chapel - Silverton



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