

New megawatts headed upstream

BY DANIEL NEWBERRY



Applegate Dam looking south.

Hydropower construction at the Applegate dam could begin as early as late summer of 2011, according to officials at the energy company, Symbiotics.

In December, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, FERC, issued a 50-year hydropower license to the Rigby, Idaho-based company, giving it the green light to retrofit the 30 year-old dam after completing water quality testing and signing agreements with several government agencies.

Water temperature and dissolved oxygen will be the main parameters tested because of their impact on fish. Pre-construction testing will allow a basis for comparison with future results, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, ODFW.

"I think their proposal can work, if all goes according to plan. If something happens, we want to make sure the plan works," said Ken Homolka, Hydropower Program Leader for ODFW.

The devil is in the details, according to Homolka, who is concerned about how the outflow at the base of the dam might impact ODFW's hatchery collection facilities. Altered flow patterns can create what fisheries biologists call "false attraction," leading spawning fish to be attracted to a different location. In this case, fish could bypass the hatchery collection facility.

The new facility will feature two turbines with a combined capacity of 10 Megawatts, enough power to supply 10,000 average households with power.

Symbiotics must construct fifteen new miles of transmission line to connect this new power with the regional grid. The nearest connection to the grid is the Ruch substation. The first mile of transmission line below the dam will be buried. The remaining miles will use the existing Pacific Power right-of-way, an issue over which local residents have voiced concern since public meetings were first held in 2002.

"Pacific Corp. will go with exact pole replacement, probably like what's now in place from the Ruch substation

to Jacksonville," said Erik Steimle, project licensing manager for Symbiotics.

The new poles will be taller and have an additional high voltage (69 kV) line strung above the existing 12.5 kV lower voltage distribution line that provides electricity to residences. Pacific Power will undertake the construction, so the price tag is still unknown.

The bottom line for the entire project, in fact, is a subject for debate. An economic analysis undertaken by FERC of the new hydropower operation, summarized in the 112-page project license, estimates that Symbiotics will lose more than a quarter million dollars in the first year of operations.

"These (FERC numbers) are estimates. We won't know the real economics until we have a look at options for finances, incentives for alternative energy, alternative energy markets. We're just going down the line. We can't tell right now," said Brent Smith, Symbiotics spokesman.

According to Smith, the big unknown costs are the final engineered designs of the various dam components, including the large Eicher fish screen they are required to use to prevent fish from being drawn into the turbines. Symbiotics anticipates saving money through a competitive bid process for the construction, made favorable by the current nationwide recession.

FERC leaves the unknowns to Symbiotics.

"It's not our decision. It's up to the licensee if they should move (ahead)," said Celeste Miller, FERC spokeswoman. "Our decision was based on the questions 'Is it environmentally sound? Is it in the public interest?'"

For more information, visit the FERC website, http://elibrary.ferc.gov/idmws/docket_search.asp and specify Docket "P-11910" or <http://www.symbioticsenergy.com/>

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