

Plan for Klamath River dam removal proceeds

Effort to help endangered salmon

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS — The largest dam removal project in U.S. history is one step closer to becoming reality.

Federal energy regulators have approved the transfer of operating licenses for four hydroelectric dams along the Klamath River in southern Oregon and Northern California, handing ownership from PacifiCorp to the nonprofit Klamath River Renewal Corp.

The group plans to demolish the dams to help endangered salmon, opening approximately 400 miles of upstream habitat.

“We view this as a big win for every stakeholder in the basin,” Dave Meurer, a spokesman for the group, said. “That includes the farm and ranch community.”

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued the order Thursday for J.C. Boyle, Copco 1, Copco 2 and Iron Gate dams, marking a key milestone in the effort to revive dwindling salmon runs in the Klamath Basin.

Removal of the fish-blocking dams is slated to begin in 2023, with a project budget of \$450 million — including \$200 million from PacifiCorp ratepayers, and \$250 million earmarked from California Proposition 1, a \$7.5 billion statewide water bond that passed in 2014.

Jim Root, president of the renewal corporation's board of directors, said the regulatory commission's decision is a “crucial and significant step forward” in restoring a free-flowing Klamath River.

“I am deeply appreciative to all of the parties who have supported this project over the years, and I wish to especially note the significant and sustained efforts of our



Iron Gate Dam spans the Klamath River near Hornbrook.

Associated Press

tribal partners,” Root said in a statement.

Getting to this point has taken decades of work, and overcoming setbacks that threatened to derail the plan, he said.

The four dams were originally built between 1911 and 1962, with a total generating capacity of 169 megawatts. They do not provide any irrigation storage or flood control.

Efforts to remove the dams began in 2010 as part of the original Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement.

At the time, the settlement agreement was tied to another settlement, the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, which would have funded several projects to provide greater irrigation water security for basin farmers and ranchers.

Congress, however, failed to implement the agreements prior to the Jan. 1, 2016, deadline, despite con-

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Dave Meurer | spokesman for nonprofit Klamath River Renewal Corp.

sensus from federal, state, county, tribal and agricultural partners.

Instead, an amended version of the settlement agreement went forward in 2016 while the restoration agreement was left behind. The split has frustrated farmers and ranchers, who remain entangled in legal disputes over water usage and future irrigation allocations.

This year is especially painful, as extreme drought prompted the Bureau of Reclamation to shut off water to most of the Klamath Project in May.

“If that other settlement was in place right now, our farmers in the Klam-

ath Basin would have well over 300,000 acre-feet of water, instead of no water,” said Dan Keppen, executive director of the Family Farm Alliance. “We got left holding the bag on that.”

The Klamath Water Users Association, which represents irrigators in the Klamath Project, has no formal position on the amended settlement agreement.

However, the group expressed concern in a memo last year about whether the return of salmon to upstream habitat could result in new regulatory restrictions that affect water usage, and whether irrigators might bear increased operation costs

for the Link River and Keno dams.

“We can hope that this detriment would be overwhelmingly offset by a water supply benefit,” the memo states, “But, it is a strong reason for concern that hope is all that we can have.”

Meurer said more fish in the river and improved water quality will ultimately be good for everyone in the basin.

“From our perspective, this can only help solve problems in the basin,” he said.

The renewal corporation was created as the entity in charge of dam removal. The group filed a joint application with PacifiCorp in 2016 to transfer the dams' operating licenses, while simultaneously working with state agencies to mitigate environmental impacts and ensure river restoration.

But in July 2020, the regulatory commission said it would only approve the transfer on the condition

that PacifiCorp remain as a co-licensee. That was a non-starter for the utility, owned by Berkshire Hathaway, to protect ratepayers and satisfy public utility commissions in Oregon and California.

Just when it appeared the project may have faltered, Oregon and California agreed to sign on as co-licensees, pledging to double contingency in case the dam removal went over budget.

The agreement — negotiated by the states, PacifiCorp, the renewal corporation and Northern California tribes — was hailed as historic and kept the project on track.

In a statement, the regulatory commission said the transfer order “confirms that the (renewal corporation) has the ability, financially and otherwise, to undertake dam removal, and with the states as co-licensees, the necessary legal and technical expertise required for such a huge undertaking.”

The regulatory commission will now consider the project's license surrender application, which includes a detailed plan for removing the dams and environmental restoration.

State lawmakers and regulators praised the order. U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, a California Democrat, said the partnerships between states, tribes and other collaborators “are ringing in a new era that recognizes the injustices of the past and invests in the future.”

Wade Crowfoot, California Secretary for Natural Resources, echoed his enthusiasm.

“We're excited and thankful for the progress,” he said. “A great deal more work and steadfast collaboration must occur between the states, tribes, federal government and communities of the Klamath Basin to achieve long-term prosperity for all, and we stand ready for that.”

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