

Dam licensing effort in Hells Canyon advances

BY KEITH RIDLER
Associated Press

BOISE — An Idaho public utility's nearly two-decade effort to renew its license for a three-dam hydroelectric project on the Snake River on the Idaho-Oregon border is moving forward with federal regulators announcing plans to update an environmental study.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission this month said it will prepare a supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to consider new developments since it completed the 2007 document for Idaho Power's Hells Canyon Project. The commission expects to complete the supplemental review that includes a draft and public comments in late 2023.

Brett Dumas, director of Environmental Affairs for Idaho Power, said the company wanted the supplemental impact statement to bolster the process against potential lawsuits.

"We felt if they didn't take this step, they would be taking some legal risk," Dumas said.

Hells Canyon is a mile-deep canyon carved by the Snake River, much of it popular for recreation but inaccessible by road. The Hells Canyon Complex includes Hells Canyon Dam, Brownlee Dam and Oxbow Dam built from the late 1950s through the 1960s.

The commission issued a 50-year license for the project in 1955, which expired in 2005. Idaho Power, starting in 2003, began trying to obtain a



Idaho Power Company/Contributed Photo, File

Hells Canyon Dam is part of Idaho Power's complex of three dams on the Snake River. The others are Oxbow and Brownlee. The company is seeking a new federal license for the complex.

new 50-year license from the commission and submitted a relicensing application. It has been operating on annual renewal of the existing license since it expired.

The dams blocked salmon and steelhead from traveling upstream, eliminating about 80% of spawning habitat for Snake River fall chinook and steelhead. The company compensates by paying for salmon and steelhead hatchery programs below the dams.

Kevin Lewis, a consultant for Idaho Rivers United, said the 1955 license was created before environ-

mental laws.

"So, clearly, it's time for a new license and some mitigation on the project," he said.

Dumas said obtaining a 50-year license would provide certainty to allow the company to begin on long-planned projects that include recreation and restoration work.

Among the events that have happened since the 2007 impact study, Idaho and Oregon in 2019 reached an agreement that requires Idaho Power to spend \$312 million on water quality and habitat improvements, and Idaho and Oregon each issued water

quality certifications for the project under the Clean Water Act.

Idaho Power had been caught in the middle of a fight between Oregon and Idaho. Oregon insisted on returning federally protected salmon and steelhead above the dams. Idaho officials didn't want salmon and steelhead, listed under the Endangered Species Act, above the dams that could lead to environmental lawsuits and force expensive mitigation work.

The finished deal the two states reached involves a 20-year study with fish moved above Hells Canyon Dam, the lowest dam in the complex, but not above the other two dams that would allow fish into the middle section of the Snake River and into southern Idaho. After the 20-year study, officials will consider returning salmon and steelhead to that area. That section is considered poor habitat because it flows through environmentally degraded agricultural areas.

Pollution leaving those agricultural areas, which are not controlled by Idaho Power, accumulates at the Hells Canyon Complex, elevating levels of methylmercury that accumulates in organisms and works its way up the food chain to fish. Methylmercury also travels downstream from the dams.

Idaho Power "ends up on the receiving end of a lot of pollution coming down from further up the basin," said Lewis. "But their project is what

collects and concentrates it, so they bear some responsibility here."

He said he'd like to see the supplemental impact statement include more robust mitigation requirements than what is contained in the 2007 document.

Idaho Power in July 2020 supplemented its license application to include an analysis of fish-related enhancement measures. In October 2020, the company also filed draft biological assessments with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The supplemental Environmental Impact Statement will consider all those new details in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires federal agencies to analyze environmental effects of proposed actions before making decisions.

Idaho Power has more than 600,000 customers in southern Idaho and eastern Oregon. The company has 17 hydroelectric facilities on the Snake River and its tributaries, with the Hells Canyon Complex on the Snake River providing about 70% of the company's hydroelectric generating capacity and 30% of the company's total generating capacity.

Idaho Power has a stated goal of providing 100% clean energy by 2045 while keeping prices low and reliability high.

"Getting a new license for Hells Canyon is critical for that," Dumas said.

Mosquitoes

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Early in the season, Hutchinson and his crew of technicians spray breeding sites of mosquito larvae with larvicides — killing the bugs before they hatch. Workers apply larvicides in storm drains, a major source of larvae, throughout mosquito season, as well as other breeding sites.

But if the bugs hatch and take to the air, adult mosquitoes become a moving and more elusive target, calling for Hutchinson to use other

tactics.

In a process called "fogging," a truck or ATV sprays a low-volume cloud of pesticide designed to kill adult mosquitoes — a tactic known as adulticiding. When mosquito swarms become too dense or access is limited, Hutchinson hires an airplane to drop both larvicide and adulticide on breeding grounds in areas infested with adult mosquitoes.

Spraying is more effective at dusk and dawn, when the bugs are active, he said.

Hutchinson said that re-

cently his crew has been treating flood irrigated areas and places where flooding has occurred from the soggy spring weather. He said aerial applications are all about timing.

"The biggest restrictions are wind and temperature," Hutchinson said. "In the low 50s, (mosquitoes) start to become less active. You need some breeze to get the spray to drift, but once it gets above 10 mph, it's too windy to be effective."

Treatment of flood irrigated pastures originally prompted the creation of BVVCD in

1975.

In addition to controlling mosquitoes, Hutchinson maintains a network of mosquito traps. The traps help him monitor mosquito populations around the district, and he sends "pools" of mosquitoes — usually 30 to 50 bugs — to a lab at Oregon State University to be tested for West Nile virus and other mosquito-borne diseases.

Because mosquitoes hatched later than normal this year, Hutchinson only recently sent the first mosquitoes of the year to the lab.

Mosquitoes are a vector, or carrier, for West Nile virus, and they can pass the virus to people, horses and birds. The virus usually causes flu-like symptoms in humans, but can cause death in rare cases.

In 2021, a total of 19 mosquito pools from Baker County tested positive for West Nile virus, and one person was infected, according to the Oregon Health Authority. Tests have found the virus in mosquitoes in eight out of the past 10 years in Baker County.

Hutchinson said he and his

crew have mostly found flood-water mosquitoes this year, rather than the culex tarsalis mosquito, the most likely vector for West Nile virus in Eastern Oregon.

Culex tarsalis mosquitoes typically start to show up in July.

District residents can report mosquito infestations, request treatment, and view fogging and spraying schedules on the district website, www.bvvcd.org. Residents can also report mosquito problems by calling 541-523-1151.

Patrols

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Duby said he didn't intend that the prototype schedule would be posted on social media. He also said he was disappointed that some people who commented were blaming Cannon. Duby said he, not Cannon, has taken the lead on assessing potential changes to the patrol schedule.

Cannon said in an interview Monday that if the city did end 24-hour patrols, during periods when officers weren't driving around town, an officer would be on call to respond to calls to the dispatch center and, depending on the circumstances, call in an off-duty officer to respond.

Duby told councilors that keeping 24-hour patrols is difficult even when the department has eight patrol officers, which is what the city's budget includes. Right now the department has six patrol officers, with one scheduled to finish training and be available in August. Duby said the city interviewed another officer candidate this week.

"I think we can all agree 24/7's ideal," Duby told councilors. "If we can figure out a way to get there, that's great. If we can't, financially, then maybe we come up with something else."

With current staffing, Duby said the department often has to call in off-duty officers to work on overtime. He said officers sometimes aren't able to take time off that they've earned because they're needed to fill a patrol shift.

"They're overworked, honestly," Duby said.

He and Cannon attribute that in part to what Cannon described in an email as "an undesirable turnover rate among officers."

Duby said the department has had an average of one or two officers resign each year for more than a decade.

Councilor Joanna Dixon, who oversaw Tuesday's meet-

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— Ty Duby, Baker City Police Chief

ing as acting mayor in place of Mayor Kerry McQuisten, who was absent, said the city needs to find some way to come up with more money to hire more patrol officers.

Dixon noted that the city is using money from the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to hire one new officer this year.

"We're not going to have that after this coming fiscal year," she said.

Council Shane Alderson asked if there was a way the city could contract with the Baker County Sheriff's Office for supplemental patrolling.

Duby said he doubted that would be feasible, since neither the Sheriff's Office nor the Oregon State Police maintain 24-hour patrolling now.

Duby said the Baker City Police Department is budgeted for 14 sworn officers — eight patrol officers, three sergeants (one detective and two patrol), two detectives and the chief.

He said the La Grande Police Department has 19 sworn officers, including 10 patrol officers.

Todd Sidway, a Baker City resident and a 25-year retired officer with the Palm Beach County, Florida, Sheriff's Office, told councilors he's concerned about the possibility of reducing patrols.

"First, I'd like to say the police department we have is very good and they are doing, I think, a fantastic job," Sidway said.

He agreed with Duby and Cannon that the department's attrition rate is too high, and that officers not being able to use their earned time off is one reason.

"We're losing officers faster and more than we should,"

Sidway said.

He said that cutting patrol hours might look good on paper, based on the relative lack of calls during certain periods, but he pointed out that when people desperately need a police officer, time is essential.

"How about the time when somebody's hurt or they fought with someone trying to break into their house and they call and it's during those hours that we're not saying there's going to be coverage but there will be somebody on call," Sidway said. "In most cases, that doesn't work. I honestly feel we need to have a police service 24/7."

Budget adoption During Tuesday's meeting councilors adopted the budget for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Councilor Kenyon Dam-

schen abstained from voting due to a conflict of interest on one item. Damschen owns property in the Scenic Vista subdivision, and the budget includes \$50,000 to pave an approximately 480-foot section of Indiana Avenue, near the city's covered reservoir, at the request of residents in a subdivision accessed by that street.

The City Council initially approved the request in June 2021.

The city's budget board, which consists of the seven city councilors and seven community members, voted in May to remove that money from the budget, but the council voted 3-2 on June 14 to reinstate that amount for the paving.

Councilor Jason Spriet, who was absent from the June 14 meeting, said on Tuesday that he couldn't vote for a budget with the \$50,000 for Indiana Avenue considering the discussion earlier in the meeting about the possible need for more money to maintain 24-hour police patrols.

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Forestry department starts fire season July 1

The Observer

LA GRANDE — Warming temperatures and changing fuel conditions are prompting the Oregon Department of Forestry to begin fire season on private forest lands in Northeast Oregon.

Fire season will be at 12:01 a.m. Friday, July 1, for forest and range lands protected by ODF Northeast Oregon District, according to an announcement from the department.

"We've seen a little reprieve this spring and early summer. Fire season has been announced in June for the past few years, so it's been good to have some delay this year," Matt Howard, an ODF district forester, said.

The fire season declaration places fire prevention restrictions on landowners and the public. Additionally,

fire prevention regulations on industrial logging and forest management activities are put into place. Lands affected include private, state, county, municipal and tribal lands in Union, Baker, Wallowa and Umatilla counties along with small portions of Malheur, Morrow and Grant counties within the Northeast Oregon Forest Protection District. This area encompasses approximately 2 million acres of protected lands.

"Those spring storms have provided some much-needed moisture. However, this moisture has caused a lot of growth in our fine fuels, such as grasses, small brush and shrubs," Howard said. "These are often our carrier fuels and are more susceptible to quickly drying and becoming ready-to-burn faster."

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