

Groups including SYRCL compile letter to feds supporting salmon, river conditions

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A diverse group of Yuba River stakeholders filed comments recently regarding a proposed hydropower project, according to a release.

The comments went to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission addressing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the relicensing of the Yuba River Development Project.

The project is owned and operated by the Yuba County Water Agency and includes three powerhouses, the largest being New Colgate powerhouse, one of the largest hydropower projects in the state. The letter included 14 groups including fishing organizations, Native American tribes, whitewater boating businesses and conservation organizations.

YCWA's original license for the project was for a 50-year term that expired in April 2016. The agency continues to operate, based on annual extensions, according to terms and conditions that are more than 50 years old and developed during a time when few environmental protections existed, the release stated.

"The last 50 years have been marked by the continued decline of salmon and the absence of habitat in the Lower Yuba River and below New Bullards Bar," stated Melinda Booth, Executive Director of the South Yuba River Citizens League. "We know the damaging effects that such an extensive hydropower and dam system has had on our watershed and our communities. We have the power and responsibility to make sure the Yuba River and the salmon will still be here for future generations."

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is authorized by the Federal Power Act to relicense hydropower dams and projects.

"Required flows in the lower Yuba River are needed to improve river habitat and to contribute flows into the Delta and San Francisco Bay," said Chris Shutes, of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance (CSPA). "The flows recommended by the Foothills Water Network and two fisheries agencies would meet those needs while protecting local agriculture and YCWA's revenues."

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New licenses for the Yuba hydropower projects were developed collaboratively over seven years of research and negotiations, and as part of the process, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for review in May. The final report is expected out this fall.



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"The Yuba hydropower project cumulatively affects fish and wildlife and recreation resources in the Yuba watershed," said Chandra Ferrari, Senior Policy Advisor with Trout Unlimited. "We have asked (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) to properly consider these effects and require YCWA to contribute its fair share of mitigation to ensure these resources are adequately protected."

American Whitewater worked to include new measures in the license that will improve recreation opportunities and amenities. One key change is that the public will be able to access the Yuba River directly below New Bullards Bar Dam.

According to Dave Steindorf with American Whitewater, "(Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's) requirement allowing public access below New Bullards Bar Dam will open a section of river that has been closed to the public for almost 50 years"

"We are also asking (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) to rethink their 30-year-old policy of not looking at future energy needs when evaluating power projects such as this one. Renewable energy is rapidly changing California's energy landscape. Mandates that will further increase the amount of wind and solar power, will continue to change what we need from other energy resources, particularly hydropower projects. It is irresponsible of (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) not to analyze how this project will be operated in the future."

The coalition's letter urges the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to include the following in its final report:

Public participation in the implementation of the new license by establishing a citizen-stakeholder ecological group

Improved river flows and consistent monitoring of water temperature in order to protect endangered salmon, steelhead and sturgeon

Recreation improvements so that the public can better access the Yuba River.

SYRCL and American Whitewater received over 200 letters from community members that were also submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

For more information, including a map of the project and locations of dams and powerhouses in the watershed, see the Dams and Hydropower page on SYRCL's website.