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Calif. company again requests permit for hydroelectric dam project in Long Canyon

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A proposed project to construct two reservoir pools for hydroelectric power in Grand County has been resurrected. On March 23, the U.S. Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) received a preliminary permit application from Sonoma, Calif.-based Utah Independent Power for the Long Canyon Pumped Storage Project.

Public comments, motions to intervene, competing applications, and notices of intent to file a competing application will be accepted through May 22, according to information from FERC.

Utah Independent Power, Inc. was originally issued a preliminary permit in 2008 for the same project, but the company decided to abandon the project at that time because of funding interest in a different project in Arizona, according to the company's president, Frank Mazzone.

"The permit we were issued years ago expired, so we reapplied. We have been advised that our application… has been accepted for filing, and the federal offices are now doing their due diligence," Mazzone said. "The comment period is a result of FERC publishing our preliminary application in the federal registry."

Mazzone said the physical aspects of the plan are mostly the same as the 2008 plan, which included the construction of two reservoir lakes to create and store power for the electric-power transmission grid. According to Mazzone, two U-shaped dams would be constructed to create the lakes. One lake would be located at the bottom of Long Canyon near the Colorado River, and the other would be constructed approximately 1,000 feet above on the plateau area of the canyon.

Approximately 2,000 acre-feet of water would be siphoned from the Colorado River into the lower reservoir. Once the water is in place, it would be pumped to the upper lake during the evening when the demand for power is low and there is excess power in the electric grid. Utah Independent Power would buy that power from the power grid to pump the water uphill for storage in the upper lake, where it would remain until daytime, when power demand is high, according to Mazzone. During peak

power usage times, the water would be released from the upper reservoir and sent through turbines on its way down to the lower reservoir, creating power that is sent back into the utility grid.

Mazzone said there is likely no cost benefit for the consumer from this form of power, but the daily induction of the hydroelectric power could help reduce the need of utility companies to purchase other forms of energy.

“Our raw material is energy we buy. We buy the energy from the utility and sell it back to the utility at a price that is competitive with energy that comes from gas and oil,” Mazzone said. “You [the consumer] would be paying the price competitive to what you were already paying.”

FERC’s acceptance of the permit application is only the first step in the process, officials said. After the May 22 deadline, FERC will review all of the comments and the application and make a determination regarding whether to issue the preliminary permit, said Celeste Miller, a spokesperson for FERC.

“The preliminary permit is good for three years and gives them priority over the land to study it for feasibility…,” Miller said. “It does not authorize any construction or other action.”

Most of the land slated for the project is public land managed by the Bureau of Land Management, said Rock Smith, manager of the Moab Field Office of the BLM. In 2008, the BLM officially opposed the project, saying it did not meet the requirements of the agency’s resource management plan for the area, according to Smith.

“We’re still completing comments, but I would say our response is most likely the same,” Smith said. “Currently, we don’t feel at the local level that we can approve occupancy and dispose of the land for this use.”

Smith said many factors are involved, including the recreational use of the land by local residents and tourists, the scenic and cultural resources, the big horn sheep habitat, possible conflicts with oil and gas wells already in operation on the plateau area slated for the upper reservoir, and the “no surface occupancy” distinction made in the resource management plan for the Long Canyon area.

“That area has critical environmental concern. It [Long Canyon Road] is also an important piece of the loop road for bikers and jeepers,” Smith said. “It’s a road used by many people that is not too difficult, but people still get the wilderness experience.”

Grand County Council chairman Gene Ciarus also served on the council

in 2008, the first time Mazzone and his associate presented the plan to the county.

“At that time, we did not oppose the project, but we questioned the legitimacy of the project and the likelihood of financing,” Ciarus said. “My personal feeling was that I don’t think it’s the appropriate place for [the project] and I question the validity of it.”

Ciarus said the council also recognized that the project was not in accordance with the land use restrictions set by the BLM in their resource management plan. Utah Independent Power has not contacted the council again, and Ciarus said council members will wait until they know more about the project and process before forming any comments or protests.

If Utah Independent Power’s preliminary permit is approved, the project will take approximately eight years to complete, including the three-year study period, Mazzone said. He estimated the project would cost approximately $1.5 billion, and as of yet, he and his business partner have not secured funding, he said.

Information about submitting comments, notices to intervene, or competing applications is available by calling 866-208-3676, or visiting the FERC website at www.ferc.gov. On the website, select the e-library tab in the “Documents and Filings” drop-down menu and enter project number P-14354 in the docket search field.
