

Native village proposes new option for restoring Eklutna River

April 22 2024, by Emily Goodykoontz, Anchorage Daily News



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As Southcentral Alaska electric utilities push forward with a much-contested plan to reduce the impacts of a hydroelectric project on fish and wildlife, the Native Village of Eklutna is proposing an alternative

option to restore water to the full length of Eklutna River.

The Chugach and Matanuska electric associations and Anchorage's hydropower utility own the dam at the base of Eklutna Lake, which dries up the 12-mile river. Last fall, as part of a legally-required effort, the utilities proposed a draft fish and wildlife program that would return water to 11 miles of the river, but leave 1 mile dry directly below the dam.

The Dena'ina village of Eklutna, the Anchorage Assembly and some [conservation groups](#) have opposed the utilities' plan because they want to see the full length of the river fully restored, with fish passage into the lake.

Disagreements over the project have intensified over the last several months, and the utilities previously rejected a separate alternative proposed by the village. The latest proposal from the Native Village of Eklutna comes as the [electric utilities](#) plan to submit their program to Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy by late this month.

The utilities' \$57 million plan would use Anchorage's drinking [water infrastructure](#). It would use a portal valve to divert water to the river from the pipe that takes drinking water from Eklutna Lake. Mayor Dave Bronson supports that plan.

The village's new proposal, discussed during a meeting with the Assembly, calls for the construction of a siphon pump station to take water directly from the bottom of the lake. The water would then be released through the dam's existing outlet gate.

The plan also calls for the dam to be removed after 10 years, or as soon as a different renewable energy source replaces the hydroelectric project's output. Or, an alternative to total dam removal could be

pursued to allow fish to swim freely into the lake.

Brenda Hewitt, tribal administrator for the village, said their proposal is an attempt to compromise with the utilities.

"We're really reaching out an olive branch to give them as much leeway as we possibly can," Hewitt said. "But we want our river back."

Importantly, it would protect Anchorage's drinking water and infrastructure, she said.

Tribal government leaders told Assembly members that their plan would cost about the same as the utilities' plan, but provide more benefits in the long run.

It would use the utilities' proposed water flow schedule for the first 10 years, even though it isn't enough to provide good fish habitat, they said.

"Putting more water down the river comes with a cost of having to pay for energy, and gas is in high demand and expensive. So we're really trying to offer a balance," said Nelli Williams, Alaska director for Trout Unlimited, which has been working with the village on the issue.

"Let's get at least some water down the stream in the near term" and then figure out a way to get more flows down in the long run, she said.

Aaron Leggett, president of Native Village of Eklutna, said they have presented the plan to the utilities, but have not received indication that the utilities are considering it. The [village](#) was not included in the legal agreement that requires the mitigation effort, which was signed between the federal government and the utilities in 1991, and so [tribal leaders](#) do not have a say in the final plan.

The Municipality of Anchorage, which currently owns 53% of the hydroelectric project, has not had voting rights within the hydroelectric project's ownership group for several years.

The Assembly earlier this week formally asked the Regulatory Commission of Alaska, which regulates utilities, to reinstate the city's voting power as a majority owner of the [hydroelectric project](#). The RCA on Friday denied the request.

Assembly leaders say the lack of [voting rights](#) has essentially left the electric utilities in charge of the plan, despite potential impacts to property taxpayers, utility ratepayers and the city's drinking water.

Assembly Chair Christopher Constant on Friday said he has drafted a measure that would demand the utilities remove the city's water facility from their proposal "because they just don't have a right to do that, no matter what the RCA or their parties might say."

Although the RCA denied the Assembly's request, "all of that is just pre-staging ... to get us to court," Constant said.

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Citation: Native village proposes new option for restoring Eklutna River (2024, April 22) retrieved 21 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-native-village-option-eklutna-river.html>

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