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Yuba River relicensing: Big numbers, big project

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Andrew Creasey

Bullards Bar

Yuba County Water Agency General Manager Curt Aikens walks towards the spillway gates at New Bullards Bar Dam. The gates, viewed here from the water-side of the dam, release water into the Yuba River during times of high flow.

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How the timeline shapes up

The Yuba County Water Agency's federal license to operate the Yuba River Development Project, which includes New Bullards Bar reservoir, is set to expire April 30.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission will continue to issue an annual license so the project can continue to legally operate after April 30, but several significant steps, and many years, stand between YCWA and a new FERC license.

- YCWA just finished its last study for the relicensing application. But the study — examining the impact of the Narrows 2 power house

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By Andrew Creasey/ acreasey@appealdemocrat.com

Millions of dollars in flood control projects, increased in-stream flows to strengthen aquatic habitat and upgrades to campgrounds and boat ramps around New Bullards Bar reservoir — those are the changes in store when the Yuba County Water Agency receives a new federal license to operate its project on the Yuba River.

But when that new license will arrive is an unknown, and it's likely years away.

The current license for the Yuba River Development Project will expire April 30. Until a new license is issued, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission will grant annual licenses to allow the project to continue to legally operate under the conditions of the original license, said Geoff Rabone, program manager for YCWA.

A number of regulatory steps stand between YCWA and a new FERC license, but the process is now largely out of the agency's hands. YCWA recently filed a technical memo on its last ongoing study related to relicensing on the impacts of the Narrows 2 power house operations on Chinook salmon, Rabone said.

The application for a new license has spread across thousands of pages and will likely cost the agency about \$25 million by the time it's over, Rabone said.

The application includes plans for two new flood control projects.

A tailwater depression system at New Colgate Powerhouse would allow the facility's hydroelectric turbines to operate during high flows in the river due to flooding. Previously, the turbines had to be shut down during high water years, which reduces the project's ability to release water by an average of 12,900 acre-feet. The project would cost \$12.2 million.

operations on Chinook salmon — was carried out during the drought, and FERC could order the YCWA to perform the study again in a more normal year, said Geoff Rabone, program manager for YCWA.

- Once FERC is satisfied with the study, it will issue a notice that the license is ready for environmental analysis. This could occur this summer or next year, depending on whether YCWA has to redo the Narrows 2 study, Rabone said.

- The notice will trigger other agencies to issue preliminary terms and conditions on the proposed license.

- FERC will then start an environmental analysis using the information gathered during YCWA's relicensing application.

- After that, FERC will issue its environmental impact statement on the license, which clears the way for YCWA to apply for a 401 certificate, which certifies that the project complies with the Clean Water Act, from the State Water Resources Control Board.

This step could take years, Rabone said.

Rabone said the agency he worked for before joining YCWA has been waiting nine years for its 401 certificate.

"And that's not unusual," Rabone said.

The application also includes plans for a new, \$126 million flood control outlet to New Bullards Bar Dam, which would double the amount of water the dam can release during floods and add about 100,000 acre-feet of additional flood storage space, Aikens said.

An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons.

According to YCWA estimates, the project proposed in the new license will have a net benefit of \$19.4 million, which is about \$5 million less than the current net benefit of the project.

The decrease is due to increased in-stream flows, which divert water that would flow through the powerhouses down stream to improve the aquatic habitat. Those increases in in-stream flows will not impact the supply of irrigation water, said General Manager Curt Aikens.

The new license also includes 40 environmental and recreational resource management conditions that will be implemented at an annual cost of \$2.8 million.

"None of the projects will happen until we get a new license," Rabone said. "All these management plans we're negotiating don't really kick in until the new license is issued. It's a big waiting game."

Fish and recreation improvements

For non-governmental organizations, such as the South Yuba River Citizens League and American Whitewater, the relicensing process affords the opportunity to bring the operational goals of the Yuba River power project up to contemporary social standards, such as environmental conservation principles that didn't exist when the first license was issued 50 years ago.

"When the current license was issued by FERC, we didn't have the understanding we do now of the river ecosystem," said Gary Reedy, senior river scientist for SYRCL. "The interest of SYRCL is to have new licensing conditions that restore much of the river's health by providing water judiciously at times that are most critical to native organisms."

These new conditions could take the form of increased in-stream flows in the Yuba River, both below and above Englebright Dam, Reedy said.

"In the lower Yuba River, the big benefit we're seeking is for salmon and steelhead," Reedy said. "The Yuba River has nice, cold flows throughout the year, and that has been one of the reasons we have as many salmon as we do returning. But there's an opportunity to enhance those flows and have even healthier salmon populations."

Like Aikens, Reedy said he didn't think the increased flows in the river would impact the supply of water for agriculture.

Dave Steindorf, California stewardship director for American Whitewater, said his organization's interest in the relicensing process was to improve whitewater rafting and kayaking opportunities and general recreational improvements on the Yuba River.

"There will be improved river access, improved campgrounds, improvements to boat launches — this is a huge recreational resource for the area," Steindorf said. "The fact that there's significant revenue streams for the project, in terms of hydropower and water sales, means it can provide other benefits to the public for the use of that water."

▲ Correction

Curt Aikens, YCWA's general manager, in actuality did not agree with another source's assessment that "... he didn't think increased flows in the river would impact the supply of water for agriculture." Aikens did not say that increased flow requirements below Englebright Dam would not impact water supplies for irrigation – and, in fact, Aikens noted the subject of increased flow requirements is a major issue in the relicensing process, and any higher flow requirements would impact agricultural water supplies.