

Eagle Mountain hydroelectric project gets state approval

Neighbors fear the plant near Joshua Tree National Park will deplete and contaminate underground water supplies

Janet Zimmerman, Riverside Press Enterprise, 10-20-15

A proposed hydroelectric plant in the desert outside Joshua Tree National Park has received approval from state water quality officials, the last step before federal regulators consider licensing the project.

The \$1.4 billion Eagle Mountain Pumped Storage Project would be built near Desert Center, north of Interstate 10, at a former Kaiser Steel iron ore mine.

The project would draw water from three wells on surrounding property and pump it 15 miles to a lined reservoir. At night, when electricity is cheaper and readily available, water would be pumped to an upper reservoir, according to documents from the State Water Quality Control Board. The board's role is to ensure a project will not contaminate water supplies.

When demand for power peaks during the day, the water would be sent to the downhill reservoir, passing through turbines to create power and supply it to the state's electrical grid.

Eventually, the water's uphill trip would be powered by wind energy, said Steve Lowe, president of the developer, Eagle Crest Energy Co. in Santa Monica.

Eagle Crest says the water flow would generate 1,300 megawatts during peak hours, enough to power nearly 1 million homes at any given time.

Neighbors and environmentalists say the development would deplete their water wells by overdrawing the underground basin in the Chuckwalla Valley. They fear seepage of water through crevices in the mine pits will carry toxic substances from mining operations to the groundwater.

"There's no life without water, and as they deplete this aquifer and their stuff leaks into the aquifer, our water quality is going to be ruined," said Donna Charpied, a jojoba farmer in Desert Center for 30 years.

The water board's documents say groundwater pumping to fill the reservoirs and operate the project "will create local drawdown areas near project supply wells and could regionally lower groundwater levels basin-wide."

The water board analysis found that the project would cause a drawdown of 3 1/2 to 4 feet at a 600-foot depth. Total drawdown from the project as well as from residents, farmers and future solar projects would range from 9 to 60 feet, the report says.

It will take four years to fill the reservoir to capacity, according to the state analysis.

Seepage would be prevented by reservoir linings and roller-compacted concrete, Lowe said. Monitoring and capture wells downslope would catch any water that escapes to be put back into the ground, he said.

Just outside the Charpied's property line is the Desert Sunlight solar development, which is expected to generate enough electricity for 160,000 homes when it is finished in 2015.

Desert Sunlight's developers monitor the Charpied's wells quarterly and have found that halfway through construction, their levels have dropped a foot, Donna Charpied said.

"Our valley cannot sustain any more of these large projects," said Charpied, who has campaigned for a decade to have 30,000 acres of the mine site designated as part of Joshua Tree National Park.

One proposed project "to turn the mine into the world's largest dump" was abandoned earlier this year by Los Angeles County. At capacity, the Eagle Mountain landfill would have received 20,000 tons of garbage by train each day for 117 years.

The dump developer, Mine Reclamation LLC, was part of Kaiser Ventures, a company formed to sell off assets and fund health benefits for Kaiser retirees. Mine Reclamation filed bankruptcy in 2011.

Kaiser Ventures has refused Eagle Crest access to the site. Lowe declined to comment on how his company will resolve the issue.

The 50-year license application will now be considered by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. No date has been set.