

Eagle Mountain hydropower project clears another hurdle

The huge power plant would draw billions of gallons of groundwater from a desert aquifer.

Sammy Roth, Palm Springs Desert Sun, 10-16-15

Federal officials rejected two appeals to a planned hydropower plant near Joshua Tree National Park on Thursday, bringing the much-maligned project one step closer to reality.

The 1,300-megawatt power plant would draw about nine billion gallons of groundwater from an aquifer beneath the Chuckwalla Valley, which critics say would harm threatened species, disrupt fragile ecosystems and damage a critical water supply. The project's proponents counter that it would help California build more clean energy by banking excess electricity generated by solar and wind farms when supply exceeds demand, and then releasing that electricity when demand exceeds supply.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission granted a license for the hydroelectric plant in June 2014, but the National Park Service and a local group known as the Desert Protection Society quickly petitioned for a rehearing and a stay of the decision. After more than a year of silence, the commission threw out those appeals on Thursday, rejecting claims that its environmental analysis was inadequate.

"This area is very important for the desert tortoise, for golden eagles, and for bighorn sheep," said David Lamfrom, California desert program director for the nonprofit National Parks Conservation Association. "Nobody's denying that this area is incredibly important."

Critics have long maintained that the commission's environmental review process was insufficient, because for years, the company that owned the land wouldn't let the company proposing the hydropower project onto its property. As a result, the environmental analysis was based entirely on aerial surveys and publicly available information.

"The entire review was done without anybody stepping foot on the property, which is a grave mistake," Lamfrom said. "How do you know what's there if you haven't been there? How do you know what rare plants are in the ground if you haven't walked the ground?"

The regulatory commission pushed back against those arguments in its decision Thursday, writing in part that the National Park Service "provides no basis for its claim that it will suffer irreparable harm in the absence of further environmental analysis." The agency also said the project is in the public interest since it would "provide a dependable source of electrical energy for the region."

The Los Angeles-based Eagle Crest Energy Company first proposed the project more than two decades ago. The company has insisted the hydropower plant wouldn't harm the aquifer below the Chuckwalla Valley since it would only remove 1 percent of the recoverable water in the basin over the next 50 years.

Some clean energy advocates support the hydropower project, too.

The question of how to ramp up intermittent renewables like solar and wind — which only generate electricity when the sun shines or the wind blows — has long been a major challenge for California policymakers. Since Gov. Jerry Brown signed a 50 percent clean energy mandate into law earlier this month, that challenge has become more pressing.

Right now, utility companies generally turn to natural gas-fired power plants, which contribute to climate change, to help integrate more solar and wind onto the grid. Some renewable energy experts say "pumped storage" projects like Eagle Mountain can help reduce the need for natural gas.

"As Riverside County continues to increase its role in delivering renewable power to the rest of California, we need to find ways to store energy for use at times when solar and wind are not generating power," county Supervisor John Benoit said in a statement earlier this year. "This project helps make renewable energy sources more viable, and in an environmentally sensitive manner."

The Eagle Mountain area was carved out of the southeast corner of the then-Joshua Tree National Monument more than 60 years ago to allow for industrialist Henry Kaiser to build an iron mine and a town. The mine was shut down in the early 1980s, and for more than 25 years, the Kaiser subsidiary that still owned the site supported a plan to turn it into a massive garbage dump for Los Angeles.

That plan got tied up in court, and eventually Los Angeles backed off. For several years, Kaiser officials still wouldn't sell the land to Eagle Crest. But the two sides struck a deal earlier this year, with Kaiser retaining the right to sell rock and iron ore tailings from the site.

While Eagle Crest now owns the land and has a federal license to build the hydropower plant, several obstacles remain.

For one, the company still needs approval from the federal Bureau of Land Management to build transmission lines across public lands. The agency's Palm Springs office didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on the status of that process Thursday afternoon.

That process could give the National Park Service another venue to press the arguments that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission rejected. The park service also said earlier this year that it would study whether parts of the Eagle Mountain area should be added to Joshua Tree National Park. The results of that study could inform the Bureau of Land Management's decision, Lamfrom said.

"What we will see is that the very concerns raised by the park service are likely going to be addressed in that study," he said. "We have the opportunity to have a more educated discussion, and we have to make sure we do that."

Even if the Bureau of Land Management approves the transmission lines, local activists and national parks advocates could try to keep the hydroelectric plant tied up in court. Parts of Eagle Mountain are designated for conservation under the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan, an ongoing state-federal effort that would lay the ground rules for the next 25 years of clean energy development and conservation across California's deserts.

Eagle Crest submitted comments to the Bureau of Land Management asking it to reverse those designations.