

Chugiak★Eagle River STAR (1)

Eklutna River restoration draws assembly questions, support

Saturday, August 26, 2017 - 14:19

By: **Kirsten Swann** (/authors/kirsten-swann),

Chugiak-Eagle River Star

Posted: Sat, 08/26/2017 - 2:18pm



Anchorage Assembly members, utility managers and other organizations gathered to discuss the Eklutna River at City Hall on Aug. 18, 2017. The river is the focus of ongoing restoration efforts by The Conservation Fund, an environmental nonprofit. (Star photo by Kirsten Swann)

Returning salmon and water to the Eklutna River will take more than simple addition, according to lawmakers and utility managers.

"We have what kind of boils down to a math problem: How much water do we need to accommodate as many groups as we can?" said East Anchorage assemblyman Forrest Dunbar. "We don't have that information yet."

In an Aug. 18 meeting on the top floor of City Hall, Dunbar and other Anchorage Assembly members met with representatives from Municipal Light and Power, Anchorage Water and Wastewater Utility, Chugiak Electric Association, Matanuska Electric Association and the Conservation Fund, seeking information on issues surrounding the waterway.

For decades, Eklutna Lake has provided power and water for the Municipality of Anchorage, flowing through the Eklutna Hydro Project and Anchorage Water and Wastewater Utility transmission lines. The lake supplies nearly 80 percent of AWWU's daily water demand and about three percent of the area's electrical needs, according to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. But the lake's role in Anchorage's infrastructure has taken a toll on the Eklutna River: For decades, the majority of the river water has been diverted to the Eklutna hydro plant by a dam near the head of the river.

As the river ran low, salmon runs disappeared from it. Could they one day return? Local utility groups and environmental organizations are preparing to find out (<http://www.alaskastar.com/2017-08-10/eklutna-river-restoration-efforts-moving-forward#.WZug8IKZN-U>).

Under the terms of a decades-old agreement (<http://akenergyinventory.org/hyd/SSH-1992-0042.pdf>) between Alaska utilities, state agencies and the federal government, the owners of the Eklutna power plant are required to conduct studies and create proposals for the "protection, mitigation and enhancement" of fish and wildlife affected by the hydro project. The work is required to begin by 2022, 25 years after the agreement's transfer date in 1997.

While the deadline is still five years away, the issue is already surfacing in municipal meetings around Anchorage. Over the course of an hour at the Aug. 18 meeting, assembly members heard presentations about Eklutna River and its relationship to Eklutna Lake, the lake's critical role in Anchorage's electric and water supply chain and ongoing efforts to restore the river to



its pre-industrial state. Partnered with the local Alaska Native corporation – Eklutna, Inc. – the nonprofit Conservation Fund plans to spend approximately \$7.5 million removing an obsolete dam from the lower stretch of the river, according to Alaska State Director Brad Meiklejohn.

While the process “is proving complicated,” Meiklejohn told assembly members he’s confident the dam will be fully removed by the end of the year. Then it’s on to the next step, he said.

“We’re in this to restore a river,” Meiklejohn said.

But restoring water flow to the Eklutna River would require major changes to the way Eklutna Lake is currently used, according to utility managers. The 555-foot-long dam near the river’s headwaters is vital to the power project, and there’s no easy way to divert a steady flow of water around it, said ML&P General Manager Mark Johnston. The loss of Eklutna Lake hydropower would result in millions of dollars in annual rate increases for area customers, according to representatives from area utilities.

But the 1997 agreement is specific in its calls for balance, Johnston said.

“The agreement doesn’t mandate that we return flows to the river,” the ML&P manager said to assembly members. “What it mandates is that we study and put together a plan to mitigate the damage to the river and to the fish and wildlife.”

Those studies are required to begin by 2022, but they could begin earlier, Johnston said. They’re the first steps in a long, complex process.

“The bottom line for us is that there are a lot of unknowns,” Johnston said. “We don’t know what we don’t know at this point.”

While local lawmakers described the Friday gathering as an informational fact-finding meeting, Chugiak-Eagle River assemblyman Fred Dyson used the opportunity to express his support for river restoration efforts, and his “outrage” at public treatment of Eklutna’s Alaska Native community.

The Eklutna people — the river’s original stewards — were not part of the 1997 agreement between utilities and various government agencies, and currently have no formal water rights to the lake or river.

“Their people have hunted and fished in this area for four or five thousand years, and they’re not formally at the table,” Dyson said.

The Chugiak-Eagle River assemblyman said he believes the assembly should pass a resolution of support for the Eklutna community and its interests in the river. Ideally, Dyson said, he’d like to see the river restored to its pre-construction state – the way it was before the dam and the power plant and the water systems. There are plenty of practical difficulties to consider, but also a steep historical debt, he said.



"We can't cure what's gone on before, but I think we have a moral, public duty to do what we can to redress the evils of the past," Dyson said. "If the cost goes up a little bit, so be it."

Email Star reporter Kirsten Swann at kirsten.swann@alaskastar.com (<mailto:kirsten.swann@alaskastar.com>).

Facebook comments

0 Comments

Sort by **Newest** ▼

Add a comment...  

 Facebook Comments Plugin

Alaska Star

11401 Old Glenn Highway, Unit 105
Eagle River, AK 99577-7499
907-694-2727

Copyright ©. Morris Communications Company, LLC. All rights reserved.

[Contact Us \(/contact\)](#)

