Chugiak ★ Eagle River STAR (/)

Eklutna River restoration efforts moving forward

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Water rushes down the Eklutna River on August 1, 2017. The river is the subject of ongoing restoration efforts. (Star photo by Kirsten Swann)

As the demolition of an abandoned Eklutna River dam (http://www.alaskastar.com/2017-06-10/work-begins-eklutna-river-dam-removal#.WYnavFKZOu4) moves forward, local utilities, lawmakers and business leaders are talking about the next step in the process – potentially restoring water and salmon to the 22-mile channel.

"This is a long-term project," said Curtis McQueen, CEO of Eklutna, Inc., one of the many stakeholders in the river's future. "We believe in balance."

Flowing from the Eklutna Glacier via Eklutna Lake, the waterway has provided for surrounding settlements for centuries. A vital cultural and historical landmark to the Alaska Native community of Eklutna, the river once provided thick runs of wild salmon. More recently, tapped by the Anchorage Water and Wastewater Utility, Chugach Electric, Municipal Light and Power (ML&P) and the Matanuska Electric Association (MEA), Eklutna has provided water and power for hundreds of thousands of Alaskans. Can it provide all three?

"That'll be our next conversation," McQueen said. "It's still in the early stages."

On July 26, members of the municipal Watershed and Natural Resources Advisory Commission gathered in an Anchorage conference room to review a proposed resolution in support of ongoing river restoration efforts.

The resolution — created for consideration by the Anchorage Assembly — was drafted by Brad Meiklejohn, Alaska State Director for the Conservation Fund, the nonprofit environmental group helping lead the lower Eklutna River dam demolition effort. Taking out the unused dam is just the first part of the river restoration process, Meiklejohn said. His proposed resolution goes further, directing Municipal Light and Power "to begin collaborative efforts on an expedited basis to restore water flows to the Eklutna River."

The issue has been simmering quietly for decades. Under the terms of a 1991 purchase agreement (http://akenergyinventory.org/hyd/SSH-1992-0042.pdf) between local utilities, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the State of Alaska and other government agencies, the owners of the Eklutna power project – Chugach, ML&P and MEA — are obligated to conduct studies and create proposals for the "protection, mitigation and enhancement" of fish and wildlife affected by the dam. The process is required to begin in 2022, 25 years from the agreement's transfer date.

"That's a pretty important part of the history," Meiklejohn said. "We've been steadily reminding people of it, reminding folks of what it says and reminding agencies of their various obligations."

The clock is ticking.

In an emailed statement, the Eklutna Hydro Project owner's committee affirmed its commitment to the 1991 fish and wildlife agreement. The process would take cooperation from all three entities, "recognizing that all of the parties involved will need to schedule budgets, resources, and the planning necessary to prepare and complete the studies."

"No one entity can act alone in this process," the committee's statement read. "Questions over water diversion for salmon, taking water from hydro power efforts or from drinking water, impacts on ratepayers, etc., cannot be answered without hard data which will be acquired in the fish and wildlife impact studies."

While the process isn't required to begin for another five years, there's nothing stopping it from starting sooner, Meiklejohn said. The lower dam demolition process is already moving at the speed of light compared to similar projects, he said.

"The river's been dewatered for 90 years: Let's not delay the problem any longer," Meiklejohn said. "Eklutna has given a lot to Anchorage's growth over the past 100 years; I think we owe it to the Eklutna people to help restore the river that runs through their community."

But members of the Watershed and Natural Resources Advisory Commission — which offers advisory opinions on "issues relating to Anchorage's watersheds, stream channels, and fish and wildlife resources" — called Meiklejohn's call for expedited action "premature."

"I don't think this is a really good idea to do this quite yet," commission member Dan Billman said at the July meeting. "No one knows the economics of this, who's really impacted, what those costs are."

After the old Eklutna River dam (https://www.usbr.gov/history/eklutna.html#Construction%20History), built in 1929, was abandoned more than 60 years ago, water for the Eklutna Hydro Project was rerouted by another dam closer to the lake, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The lower dam was backfilled with sediment, which is now being removed during the ongoing dam demolition project.

Today, the rivulet of water flowing down the riverbed below the original dam comes from surrounding streams, like Thunderbird Creek, according to the Municipality of Anchorage.

Restoring the length of the Eklutna River to historical levels would require reworking operations at Eklutna Lake, Billman said. Currently, the lake provides the majority of Anchorage's water and about three percent of the area's power needs, according to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. Tinkering with the system might have an impact on everything from electric rates to water supply, Billman said.

Instead of supporting expedited action, commission members recommended the municipality establish a timeline and process for the work to come. Conversations need to take place with utility owners, the state and other entities, according to the commission.

"There's so much wound up in this," Billman said. "This isn't a good time to take sides."

Anchorage Assembly members are scheduled to discuss Eklutna River restoration issues in an August 18 meeting (http://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/Events/Pages/WorksessionreEklutnaDamandSalmonRstoration08182017 at City Hall.

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