

Condit Dam removal clears hurdle

It may be dismantled next fall after PacifiCorp reaches tentative deal

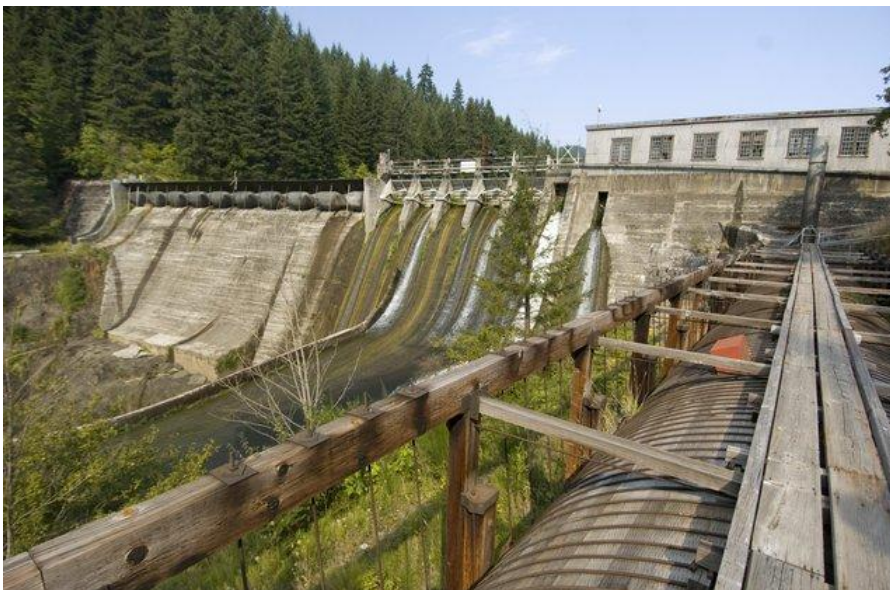


Photo by Steven Lane

Condit Dam on the White Salmon River could be removed as early as next fall after a tentative agreement was reached between Skamania and Klickitat counties and PacifiCorp, which operates the 125-foot dam.

By Kathie Durbin

Friday, November 12, 2010

PacifiCorp has reached a tentative settlement with two Columbia River Gorge counties that waged a 10-year legal battle against the utility's plan to decommission 97-year-old Condit Dam on Washington's White Salmon River.

With that roadblock out of the way, the 125-foot-tall dam could be demolished as soon as the fall of 2011. It would become the highest dam ever dismantled in the United States. Its removal would open the river's upper reach and a tributary to salmon for the first time since 1913.

The Portland-based utility announced Tuesday that it had reached agreement with Klickitat and Skamania counties on a deal under which it will pay the counties \$675,000 to offset the impacts of dam removal, including the effects on a group of cabin owners at Northwestern Lake. The reservoir behind the dam will be drained with the dam's removal.

Under the agreement, the project's hydroelectric water right will be transferred to Klickitat County, and PacifiCorp will agree to protect the structural integrity of Northwestern Lake Bridge.

In return, the counties, which are formal intervenors in the federal dam decommissioning process, agree not to oppose the removal of the dam and associated structures, to complete noxious weed control in the project area after decommissioning, and to work with the utility to protect public safety during the dam's demolition.

Klickitat County commissioners approved the settlement Tuesday; Skamania County commissioners are scheduled to consider the deal on Tuesday.

"Reaching agreement with the counties allows us to continue moving forward on the decommissioning of the Condit project," said project manager Todd Olson of PacifiCorp in a statement.

Two more steps remain, Olson said: Obtaining a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and winning final approval of the plan in what's known as a "surrender order" from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The company also is in the final phase of contracting for the dam demolition work, Olson said.

Opponents of dam removal enlisted the help of the counties early on. Bankrolled by Klickitat County, which was flush with revenue from its

Roosevelt landfill operation, the counties hired Washington, D.C., lawyers who specialized in energy law and formally petitioned FERC for intervenor status in March 2000.

They argued that local residents had been excluded from negotiations between PacifiCorp and Northwest conservation groups and government agencies over the dam removal plan. Parties to those negotiations agreed not to sue to block the demolition plan.

Under the plan, a 12-by-18-foot hole will be blasted near the base of the dam, releasing more than 2 million cubic yards of sediment into the lower White Salmon and the Columbia River. PacifiCorp chose that plan rather than a more costly option that would have involved dredging most of the sediment from behind the dam before demolition.

Opponents also questioned whether state and federal agencies that signed the settlement agreement compromised their ability to objectively review the company's dam removal plan.

In 2006, the Klickitat County Public Utility District informed PacifiCorp that it wanted to buy the dam and was prepared to acquire it and its electrical generating facilities through condemnation if necessary.

That tactic, ignored by PacifiCorp, was quickly dropped.

This week, officials from both counties issued statements commending the settlement.

"Klickitat and Skamania Counties participated fully in the review of Condit Dam removal in state and federal environmental studies and submitted comments to a host of governmental agencies, including the Washington State Department of Ecology," said Klickitat County Commissioner Dave Sauter. "PacifiCorp took seriously the counties' concerns and incorporated a number of the recommendations into the dam removal plan."

Jamie Tolfree, chairwoman of the Skamania County Board of Commissioners, said, "The counties will now look to the federal agencies and the Department of Ecology to ensure that dam removal is carried out consistent with federal and state requirements."