

Two new dams near the Grand Canyon? Conservation groups call the plan 'unconscionable'

[Debra Utacia Krol](#) Updated 2:34 p.m. MT Sept. 27, 2019

A Phoenix company wants to build two hydroelectric dams less than five miles from the eastern border of Grand Canyon National Park, submerging several miles of the Little Colorado River and the endangered fish habitat it protects.

If they're built, the dams could produce more than just electricity. Environmentalists say the project could further imperil the fish, the native humpback chub, interfere with the Canyon's already-degraded hydrology and irreparably damage sites held sacred by at least one Arizona tribe.

Pumped Hydro Storage LLC recently applied for a preliminary permit from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to begin the process of developing a hydroelectric dam project on the Little Colorado River. The dams would rise on Navajo Nation land, close to the eastern border of the Grand Canyon.

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The Navajo Nation Salt Trail Canyon Pumped Storage Project would generate electricity by pumping water between two dams located within the river gorge about 16 miles northwest of Cameron and four river miles up river from the confluence of the Little Colorado and the Colorado.

A 240-foot-tall upper dam would be sited about 3,000 feet higher in elevation than the 140-foot-tall lower dam. Both dams would enclose reservoirs, one of

which would stretch 2 miles up the Little Colorado River Gorge. Turbines would pump water through underground tunnels between the two bodies of water.

A paved road would be constructed between State Route 89A and the Salt Trail Canyon where it emerges into the Little Colorado, and a new 20-mile-long transmission line would be built to the existing Moenkopi substation.

The application was published Sept. 23 in the Federal Register and attracted the notice of environmental groups, who swiftly reacted to the idea.

“(The dam) will industrialize what is now a very remote area,” said Taylor McKinnon, senior public lands campaigner with the Center for Biological Diversity. The project would further impede the recovery of the endangered humpback chub, the last remaining chub species within the Grand Canyon, he said.

Since the gates of Glen Canyon Dam were closed in 1963, the ecology of the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon has been altered, some fear forever. David Wallace and Michael Chow/The Republic, Arizona Republic

“It would flood miles of humpback chub habitat and imperil one of its most important spawning sites by altering the flow downstream at the confluence with the Colorado River,” McKinnon said. “It would also flood and eliminate river habitat.”

The project would also remove about 13,000 acre-feet of water from other uses, since it would be contained within the two reservoirs.

And the dam would affect one of the Hopi Tribe’s most sacred places, Sipapu, located near the Salt Trail Canyon.

“The proposed pumped storage project is an unconscionable assault on the Grand Canyon and its Native peoples,” said Roger Clark, program director for

the Grand Canyon Trust, in a statement. "Not only would it industrialize the Hopi Salt Trail and areas culturally significant to Navajo and many others, it would violate the rights of those who have called this place home since time immemorial."

Hopi Tribal Chairman Timothy L. Nuvangyaoma was unavailable for comment.



A hiker moves through the Little Colorado River on the Navajo Nation several miles upstream from the confluence with the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park. This part of the Little Colorado would be submerged in a 2.5 mile long reservoir from a proposed dam. (Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)

Phoenix-based Pumped Hydro Storage filed for incorporation March 24, about six weeks before filing the initial application with the federal agency.

Steve Irwin, Pumped Hydro Storage's manager, said the project would provide power storage and on-demand power generation. He also said it would bring new jobs to the Navajo Nation, which will suffer deep economic losses from the closure this year of the Navajo Generating Station and the coal mine

that supplied it.

"This is one of the best sites in the country for a pumped hydro project," Irwin said.

Irwin said he has spoken with Navajo officials, but was not aware of any Hopi cultural concerns. He said he will consult with the tribe.

Navajo Nation officials did not return calls by The Republic seeking comment.

Irwin said he's aware of the humpback chub. "We have to go through five assessments, like hydrology, environmental, engineering and archaeological assessments to get the permit," he said. "The project will have to pass muster."

He would not say if the company had secured the funding to conduct the study, which the application said could cost from \$4 million to \$8 million, or obtained the rights to the water for the reservoirs.

It's not the first time that development has been proposed on or close to the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers.

In 2017, after an eight-year campaign by local Navajo and Hopi tribal members and environmentalists, the Navajo Nation voted down the Grand Canyon Escalade project. Opponents said the mega resort and tramway would have caused environmental and cultural damage without any significant revenue benefit to the tribe.

In the 1950s and 60s, a series of dams were proposed along the Grand Canyon and its tributaries for water storage. Those were also scrapped, a decision that ultimately led to the construction of Navajo Generating Station.

"Every dam that was proposed for that same stretch of the river was deemed

unfeasible because the reservoir would fill with sediment," Clark said. Moreover, he said, the sediment trapped by the new dams would not flow to the Colorado, where it's needed to keep beaches built up, provide camouflage for indigenous fish like the chub and provides other environmental benefits to the riverine system.

The public comment period for the project runs through Nov. 22.



Looking down to the Little Colorado River from Salt Trail Canyon on the Navajo Nation several miles upstream from the confluence with the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park. This part of the Little Colorado River would become part of a 2.5 mile long reservoir if a proposed dam were constructed. *(Photo: David Wallace/The Republic)*

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