

Focus on: Future of Enloe Dam



Enloe Dam is owned by the Okanogan Public Utility District (OPUD) and located on north central Washington's Similkameen River. It was constructed by the Okanogan Valley Power Company in the early 1920s to provide power to nearby communities. However, the dam has not operated or provided any benefits since hydropower production ceased in 1958. In the fall of 2018, the Okanogan Public Utility District (OPUD) determined that it would be uneconomical to repower the dam. The OPUD and interested parties are now considering the future of the facility, and with that, the future aquatic resources of the Similkameen River.

Fish production potential

Natural resource agencies, tribes and interested parties have long inquired about the fish production potential above Enloe Dam. Based upon a survey conducted in 1983, the river supports more than 340 miles of potential salmon and steelhead habitat, including access to substantial cold water spawning and rearing habitat in Washington and British Columbia. Just downriver of the dam is a falls, known as Similkameen Falls or Coyote Falls. While historically considered a barrier to upstream migration of salmon and steelhead (including a variety of interpretations of a tribal legend about coyote blocking the river to salmon), there is historical evidence of anadromous fish above the falls and the dam site. As recent as 2020, Chinook salmon were observed above the falls at the base of Enloe Dam. If Chinook can ascend the falls, it is likely that higher-jumping steelhead can as well. Furthermore, the Similkameen flows into the Okanogan River at the town of Oroville, which continues to the Columbia River. This connection provides opportunity for supporting regional and ocean fisheries.

Assessing the future of Enloe Dam

Now that OPUD has decided not to pursue repowering the dam, a number of state and federal agencies, tribes and organizations are interested in the future of the dam. There are at least two options to consider: leave the dam in the river or remove it.

Leaving the dam in place is the status quo and requires OPUD to be responsible for the ongoing cost and liability of safely managing the dam. To date, OPUD has demonstrated the ability and provided resources to do this. Although leaving the dam in place would avoid a substantial investment in dam removal, the structure is a barrier to habitat connectivity in and along the river. This includes blocking the passage of fish, such as Upper Columbia Spring Chinook salmon and steelhead, listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Removing the dam and restoring the impacted area would return the landscape to a more natural configuration and have significant environmental benefits. However, dam removal, including managing the sediment trapped behind the dam, will require substantial funding. OPUD is not actively pursuing this option due to the uncertainty about the cost of dam removal, who would be responsible for it, and who would pay for it, but it has expressed openness to considering the option.

Where are we now?

The OPUD is currently making repairs to the penstocks as part of compliance with State Dam Safety Regulations. This will allow them to regain some control of flow over the dam and to assess the structural integrity of the dam. The repair work improves OPUD's operational capabilities at the dam while the assessment will provide structural safety information. These outcomes support ongoing safety needs as well as dam removal.

Sediment surveys and investigations were conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey in 2019 and 2020 to determine sediment volume and contamination. A report should be complete by Spring 2021 and will help inform how to manage the sediment. It will also inform a conceptual dam removal plan being commissioned by the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation from the company Interfluve.

The Colville Tribes, local and national non-governmental conservation organizations, federal agencies, and Washington state agencies have expressed interest in working with the OPUD to assess the feasibility and cost of dam removal. Once these parties have a clearer idea of the cost and any technical challenges associated with dam removal, it will be possible to develop a funding plan and timeline.

Interested Washington state agencies include:

Department of Fish and Wildlife

The Department of Fish and Wildlife seeks to preserve, protect and perpetuate fish, wildlife and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities. It plays an important role in promoting, assessing, and implementing salmon and steelhead recovery in the Columbia Basin and statewide, and permits and provides technical advice for dam removals and other restoration projects. Contact Michael Garrity at 360-810-0877 or michael.garrity@dfw.wa.gov

Recreation and Conservation Office Salmon Recovery Funding Board

The board is a governor-appointed group charged with administering federal and state funding to restore salmon populations. The Recreation and Conservation Office provides support to the board and manages the distribution of that funding to acquisition and restoration projects. Fish passage construction projects, along with all levels of feasibility, design, and permitting are eligible grant activities. Grant applications are accepted yearly, beginning in March and concluding in June, with funding decisions in September. Contact Marc Duboiski at 360-867-8646 or marc.duboiski@rco.wa.gov

Department of Ecology

Ecology's Dam Safety Office (DSO) ensures OPUD manages the dam safely. DSO is working with them on their penstock repair project and will permit dam removal if that option is pursued. Ecology also ensures actions at the dam comply with regulations for water quality, toxic sediments, and environmental review. Ecology completed this for the repair project and would be involved in any effort to remove the dam. Contact Sage Park at 509-457-7120 or sage.park@ecy.wa.gov

Department of Natural Resources

DNR manages state-owned aquatic lands, which are lands defined by the Washington State Constitution and further clarified by state and federal laws. DNR will continue to engage in management of the Similkameen River consistent with the guidelines of its jurisdiction. The Similkameen River was meandered (a type of survey) by the federal government. Based on this, DNR considers the entire river to the Canadian border to be navigable, asserting state ownership of the beds and shores of the river that were not otherwise conveyed. However, given the uncertainties regarding ownership in the immediate vicinity of Enloe Dam, DNR has concluded that it will not seek a use authorization for Enloe Dam as it exists today or for its reservoir. Contact Thomas Gorman at 360-701-7692 or thomas.gorman@dnr.wa.gov

ADA accommodations

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