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Prescott cautions hydroelectric company about its rights to Big Chino water Pumped storage project gets review by Prescott Council



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The hydroelectric plant planned northwest of Paulden would tap into the same underground pool of water that the City of Prescott intends to pump from one day: The Big Chino Basin.

That has caused concerns for some members of the Prescott City Council, who cautioned ITC Project Engineer and Director Brian Studenka this week that the company's plans for a pumped-storage hydroelectric plant in the Paulden area must not affect the city's water rights.

"I want to make sure our water rights aren't compromised, and if (they are), you're going to fix it," Councilman Jim Lamerson told Studenka Tuesday, Sept. 25, after hearing a presentation on ITC's plans.

Throughout his report to the council, Studenka stressed the partnership aspects of ITC's plans to pump water from the ground in the Big Chino Basin and use it to generate electricity.

The City of Prescott is among the group of stakeholders the company has assembled to offer input on ITC's plans, Studenka said. "I want to reiterate our desire to work with Prescott, Prescott Valley, and Chino Valley," he added.

MITIGATION COMMITMENT

This past February, the City Council approved a resolution that allowed the city to become involved in the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) hearing on ITC Holdings' application for the Big Chino Pumped Storage Project.

In the meantime, ITC has conducted a number of meetings to discuss the project, and has been at work on a groundwater modeling study to help determine what the impact would be on the Big Chino groundwater and the Verde River.

"We've stated we're committed to mitigating the impact we would have," Studenka told the council.

By the first quarter of 2019, he said, ITC intends to release a "suite of options" for mitigating any impacts from its pumping.

As Studenka explained it, the pumped storage project would consist of a custom plant built with reversible turbines to pump water from a lower reservoir to an upper reservoir during periods of low demand/prices or high variable generation supply.

Electricity would be generated on demand by flowing the water back through a turbine to the lower reservoir. The project would require a one-time pumping of 27,000 acre-feet of water to fill the reservoirs, as well as 925 acre-feet per year to refill the water that is lost to evaporation. (An acre-foot equals 325,851 gallons).

Studenka said the annual requirement is less than the 1,500 acre-feet currently being used for agriculture on the existing ranching operations. That need would go away under ITC's plans, he said, noting, "If we purchase, we would retire the ag (uses). We want to get a point where it does not affect the Verde River negatively."

BIG CHINO INTERESTS

The ITC project would be located near the ranchland northwest of Paulden that the City of

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Prescott and the Town of Prescott Valley bought in 2004.

The plan was for the two communities to build a pipeline between the former JWK Ranch property — now known as the Big Chino Water Ranch — and the Prescott/Prescott Valley area. The pipeline was slated to provide water for the growing communities.

Over the years, however, the water ranch plans faced legal challenges because of its proximity to the headwaters of the Verde River. A 2010 settlement was reached between Prescott, Prescott Valley, and the Salt River Project (SRP) that postponed construction of the pipeline while new monitoring and modeling studies were conducted to determine impacts of the pumping.

The study got underway in the early 2010s, and the three parties are now in about the fifth year of their eight-year study. Meanwhile, Prescott and Prescott Valley continue to own the land and have the right to transport 8,068 acre-feet per year from the Big Chino Basin.

Lamerson stressed that the city has a right to the water, and that the future imported water is a part of the city's water portfolio. Still, he told Studenka, "In no way do I want to appear adversarial, because I'm not."

CALIFORNIA BOUND?

City Councilman Phil Goode questioned Studenka about the ultimate uses for the electricity that is produced. Noting that California has strict requirements and goals for renewable energy, Goode asked whether the energy would be sent to the West Coast.

"It seems like you're creating this project to serve California," Goode said.

Studenka allowed that "it may make sense" for parties in California to participate in the project. Indeed, his presentation posed the question "Why Arizona?" with the response that north-central Arizona "is well-situated for a pumped storage facility to support the successful implementation of renewable energy public policy goals in the region."

The presentation added that suitable topography, along with availability for grid interconnections, and "close proximity to grid market hubs" were all characteristics of a good pumped storage site.

ITC's timeline calls for the FERC licensing process to take place in about 2021, and for plant construction to take place from about 2022 to 2025. The project is slated to begin "energization" by 2028.

WAIT AND SEE STANCE

After Tuesday's meeting, City Attorney Jon Paladini noted that Prescott, Prescott Valley, and SRP are still working on their modeling and monitoring process, even as ITC conducts its own studies.

Once the two studies are complete, Paladini said the city would compare the results, and determine whether ITC's pumping would impact the city's Big Chino water rights.

Meanwhile, he said, the city has yet to take a position on the pumped storage project plans.

Round of public open houses for Paulden-area hydroelectric plant set for October

Prescott meeting scheduled Oct. 25

ITC Holdings Corp., which is studying the feasibility of developing the proposed Big Chino Valley Pumped Storage Project to serve as a regional energy source for the Southwest, will conduct three public open-house meetings in October.

The third in the series of meetings is scheduled in Prescott.

The Prescott open house meeting will run from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 25, with registration beginning at 5:30 p.m. It will take place at the Hassayampa Inn, 122 E. Gurley St.

The other two meetings will take place at:

- 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 23, at the Boulder City Multi-Use Building, 1204 Sixth St., Boulder City, Nevada.
- 7:30 to 9 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 24, at the Seligman High School, 54255 N. Main St., Seligman.

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ITC's proposed project involves a closed-loop pumped storage hydro facility and three transmission lines located in Yavapai, Coconino and Mohave counties in Arizona and Clark County, Nevada, according to a news release from the company.

"The public is invited to a stakeholder meeting near you to hear from ITC Holdings Corp. representatives to learn about the proposed Big Chino Valley Pumped Storage Project," the release stated. "Representatives will share preliminary resource study findings, forthcoming study plans, potential impacts and mitigation approaches and associated licensing studies."

Issues to be discussed include groundwater, protected species, tribal and cultural resources, vegetation, wetlands, water resources, and terrestrial habitats.

The Big Chino Valley Pumped Storage Project must be licensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).

"ITC encourages interested stakeholders to attend the public meeting to learn more about the licensing process and share their input regarding the resources studies that will inform the license application that ITC will submit to FERC," the release added.

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