

DRAFT RECREATION RESOURCES STUDY PLAN

Blue Lake Hydroelectric Project, FERC No. 2230, Expansion

Prepared by:

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July, 2008

This Draft Recreation Resources Study Plan describes proposed studies related to the Blue Lake hydroelectric project (“Project”, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) No. 2230) Expansion. The Project is owned by the City and Borough of Sitka, Alaska, and operated by the City and Borough of Sitka Electric Department (collectively, the “City”).

The City is in the process of applying for an amendment to the Project’s existing FERC license to reflect two significant changes in Project design: 1) addition of a third generating turbine at or near the existing powerhouse and 2) raising the Project dam as much as 83 feet from the existing spillway height of El 342 to El 425. The City is exploring feasibility of these changes because of recent electric load forecasts in the face on increasing diesel fuel costs. Details of elements of the proposed expansion are described in the Initial Consultation Document (ICD) which was distributed to you early in the license amendment process.

These recreation resource study results will be used by the FERC and state and federal resource agencies to help evaluate impacts of the Expansion-related actions prior to issuing the Expansion-related license amendment.

BACKGROUND

The City recently received a new 30-year operating license for the Project. This license was issued after an extensive relicensing process during which the City conducted studies to document existing environment and potential impacts of continued Project operation. Because the relicensing proposal did not include significant changes in either the Project design or operation, projected impacts were considered insignificant.

The proposed Expansion would result in significant physical change, primarily related to inundation of areas around Blue Lake due to dam raising, and to construction and use of access roads and a new powerhouse. This study plan seeks to address these additional effects in addition to analyses done for relicensing.

PROPOSED RECREATION RESOURCES STUDIES

GENERAL

Blue Lake Project recreation resource studies will be comprised of two primary efforts, relative to the Project/Study area (defined below): 1) Literature and Information Review and 2) Field Studies, as described in detail below.

PROJECT/STUDY AREA

The Study Area will include those recreational areas accessed by Project-related roads, transmission corridors, campgrounds, parking lots, trails and other features. This will include Sawmill Creek, Blue Lake, Beaver Lake Trail, Herring Cove trail, Heart Lake trail, and the transmission corridor from the Fish Valve Unit to the Blue Lake Unit and from the Blue Lake Unit to Thimbleberry Lake.

LITERATURE AND INFORMATION REVIEW

Literature Review

The City will research available recreation resources literature, including, but not limited to:

- USFS Tongass National Forest recreation use planning and management documents;
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) fishing and hunting use levels in potentially-affected areas;
- City and Borough of Sitka data and information regarding recreation use of Blue Lake and Sawmill Creek and other areas accessible via the Project's access road system;
- Information from the campground host at the USFS Sawmill Creek campground near the Fish Valve Unit;

Most of the relevant available literature resides at various City and resource agency offices in Sitka and Juneau. The City will also search other sources, including academic and resource agency libraries and files, as appropriate.

FIELD STUDIES

During relicensing, the City installed several traffic counters on various roads providing recreation access within the Project area. Counters were placed at three locations along the Blue Lake Road (BLR).

- 1) At the junction between BLR and Sawmill Mill Creek Road;
- 2) On the Sawmill Creek Campground access road;

- 3) On the BLR past the Sawmill Creek Campground access road, to determine the visits to BL.

The data gathered will be further reviewed to determine current usage.

The City, or an approved contractor, will interview Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Sitka Conservation Society and typical subsistence users in the area to determine level and kinds of such use in the project area. The City will also interview the USFS campground host at the Sawmill Creek campground to obtain any further information, if the host position is filled this year. Campground users have probably been on site for the current season, limiting applicability of their information to the recent past.

ANALYSIS of DAM RAISING IMPACTS

A primary dam-raise related issue could be the easing of access to the existing boat launch area near Blue Lake dam. Currently, Blue Lake water levels require that drivers negotiate three switchbacks and a very rough, unmaintained road surface leading to the boat launch area. After the dam is raised, the boat launch area will be quite near the overlook at the end of the BLR, easing access to the boat launch area. Since most Blue Lake recreation requires a boat to access fishing and hunting, easing boat launch access might significantly increase recreational use and pressure on fish and wildlife in the accessible areas. Increased access and recreational use might also affect Blue Lake water quality, which is maintained within narrow bounds because of its use as Sitka's drinking water supply.

Generally, the City proposes to assess impacts of the dam raise by first using data collected during relicensing (traffic counters, USFS campground and trail use surveys, ADF&G fishing and hunting pressure estimates) to establish a baseline.

Next, the City will estimate, in consultation with stakeholders, the additional use expected to arise from eased access to boat launch facilities. This estimate will be further broken down into estimated numbers of various recreation subgroups, such as those targeting lake fishing, stream fishing, goat hunting, deer hunting, day hiking, camping, etc, to the extent possible. This will necessarily be a subjective estimate.

STUDY AND REPORT SCHEDULE

The recreation resources studies should commence in summer, 2008 and the report should be available as a draft by winter, 2008-2009. If further surveys are required, the effort may lapse into 2009, recognizing that weather and access may preclude further surveys until summer of that year.