

DRAFT RECREATION RESOURCES STUDY PLAN

Blue Lake Hydroelectric Project, FERC No. 2230 Relicensing

Prepared by:

City and Borough of Sitka Electric Department

105 Jarvis St., Sitka AK, 99835

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

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

The City is in the process of obtaining a new license for the Project. In the relicensing process, the City must make available to the FERC information on existing natural resources potentially affected by the relicensing action. The FERC will use that information to characterize the environmental baseline in various impact evaluation and other decision documents.

As required under FERC regulations, the City has submitted a Notice of Intent (NOI) to relicense the project, distributed an Initial Consultation Document (ICD), held agency and public meetings and a site visit, all in November and December, 2002. In the ICD, the City did not propose specific recreation studies.

In comments on the ICD dated February 14, 2003, the US Forest Service stated, relative to the basis and methodology for recreations studies:

***“1) Basis of Study:** The city of Sitka has a population of nearly 9,000 people living and working in the community. The project components (reservoir, Sawmill Creek, access road, transmission lines) are within five miles of the center of town. Knowledge of existing recreation uses needs to be evaluated for effects of current and future project operations.*

***2) Study Methodology:** The Blue Lake Road is used by recreationists to access Sawmill Creek Campground, Beaver Lake Trail, Heart Lake trail and Blue Lake Reservoir overlook and lake. A study of the existing recreation use of the roads can be accomplished by using road counters and infrared trail counters for a full year. These counters would calculate motorized use and pedestrian use of the road. With these visitor numbers, the Forest Service would be able to evaluate the amount of recreation use in the*

area and how the operation of the project could help manage the recreation use of the area.”

In September, 2003, the City distributed Scoping Document 1 as part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for the relicensing. In comments on SD1 dated December 23, 2003, USFS stated, regarding recreation resources:

“At issue is whether or not current and/or proposed project operations will affect recreational activities and opportunities within or adjacent to the project area. The USFS operates the Sawmill Creek campground and administers the Beaver Lake hiking trail. Additionally, initial planning has begun for the reconstruction of the trail between Heart and Thimbleberry Lakes that lies within the transmission line corridor (Sitka Trail Plan 2003). Other recreational activities such as fishing on Blue Lake and Sawmill Creek, and hunting (goats and Sitka black-tailed deer), are known to take place on national forest lands accessed from the Blue Lake road and by boat from Blue Lake.”

In comments on the Draft Scoping Document 2 (SD2), dated May 7, 2004, USFS stated:

“In our December 23, 2003, response we identified resource issues not identified in SD1. Thus far in the pre-filing process the CBS has not outlined how they will address recreation resources within or adjacent to the project area. An issue is whether or not current and/or proposed project operations will affect recreational activities and opportunities. We look forward to your submittal of a draft Recreation Resources Plan.”

This Plan reflects written comments from USFS dated February 12 and May 7, 2004, as well as comments transmitted verbally. This plan will be distributed to all consulting resource agencies and finalized prior to any field work, which is expected to begin in summer, 2004.

PROPOSED RECREATION RESOURCES STUDIES

GENERAL

In general, the City proposes to survey potentially-affected recreation resources in the Project area to provide a current baseline for environmental analyses necessary to complete Project relicensing. Because the City is not proposing any operational or structural changes to the project, (particularly with respect to raising the dam and subsequent elevation of the reservoir) no additional inundation, construction or other disturbances are expected.

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

STUDY AREA

The Study Area will include those areas accessed by the Project's access roads or transmission corridors. This will include Sawmill Creek, Blue Lake, various trailheads near the USFS Campground, and the transmission corridor from the Fish Valve 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 documentation for the relevant area;
- 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 campground near the Project's Fish Valve Unit;

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

Decision-Making Based on Literature and Information Review

A brief report of results of the literature and information review will be compiled by the City and distributed for resource agency review. Comments on literature findings will be considered when planning field studies described below.

FIELD STUDIES

Primary recreation field studies will be comprised of placement of traffic counters on various roads providing recreation access in the Project area. Specifically, these counters will be placed at three locations along the Blue Lake Road (BLR).

- 1) At the junction between BLR and Sawmill Mill Creek Road;
- 2) At the turn off to the USFS campground and;
- 3) Past the campground turn-off to determine the visits to BL.

The counters will be placed during late summer, 2004, and will remain in place for the duration of the licensing period. Counters will be checked periodically to assure their presence and working order.

As proposed in the Subsistence Resources Study Plan, also prepared by the City in 2004, we may interview 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. Campground users and hosts have probably been on site for the current season, limiting applicability of their information to the recent past.

REPORTING

The City will prepare a Draft Recreation Resources Report documenting both the literature review and field survey components of the study. The report will be organized in traditional technical report format, including:

INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

LITERATURE REVIEW

FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

Methods

Results

RECOMMENDATIONS

APPENDICES

Specific Site Location Data

STUDY AND REPORT SCHEDULE

The recreation resources studies should commence in summer, 2004 and the report should be available as a draft by early fall, 2004. If further surveys are required, the effort may lapse into 2005, recognizing that weather and access may preclude further surveys until summer of that year.