

The Susitna-Watana Dam: A Costly Harmful Project



Overview

The Susitna-Watana Dam is a proposed mega hydroelectric project that would pose significant harmful impacts to the Susitna River's communities, wildlife, and ecosystems. Located 87 river miles north of Talkeetna in the heart of one of the most visited, fished, and hunted areas of the state, this massive 705 foot tall dam would severely interfere with the spawning habitats of salmon, caribou migration routes, and tourism-and fish-based businesses. The Susitna River Coalition (SRC) formed in response to this ill-conceived hydroelectric project in 2011 and continues to work with conservation energy leaders and organizations to ensure that it is permanently shelved.

The Su Dam: Still on the Table, and Still a Bad Investment

The Susitna-Watana Dam was halted by Governor Walker in 2014 but continues to be pursued. On January 26th, 2023, the Alaska Energy Authority, AEA, the state's energy office, presented the Su Dam project to the Alaska House Energy Committee.

The data provided in the presentation, including the cost-benefit and economic analyses, is almost a decade old, relying on information from 2014. According to the AEA, the project would cost an estimated \$7 billion (in 2023 dollars). In addition, the state would need to fund expensive upgrades to transmission lines, causing utility rates to escalate. The estimated amount of time to complete the project is 10-15 years, and the required transmission upgrades would undoubtedly prolong this timeline.

As the state sets ambitious carbon reduction goals, taking responsible action to create economically responsible and clean energy systems for Alaskans means deciphering what projects will create the least harmful impacts on our livelihoods for decades to come. The Susitna-Watana Hydro project is certain to cause detrimental impacts to Southcentral Alaska's economy and ecology.

Dam Reservoirs Release Harmful Emissions

For the first time ever, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) included methane emissions from dams and reservoirs in its annual report in 2022. The U.S. is the first country to include emissions from "flooded lands" in their greenhouse gas reports. Despite significant research concluding that dam reservoirs are not emissions-free, policymakers, utilities, and state organizations, like the AEA, continue categorizing large-scale hydro dams as "clean" energy facilities. Dam reservoirs produce harmful greenhouse gases that greatly offset potential carbon reduction benefits. Reservoirs emit methane, a gas that is more than 25 times as potent as carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere. For more info: therevelator.org/dam-emissions-reporting





Impacts on Fish, Wildlife and Local Economies

There is a multitude of credible scientific research demonstrating the detrimental effects that massive hydrologic change would have on the entire Susitna ecosystem. The Susitna dam would be “load-following,” meaning water is released from a reservoir to meet energy demands. This would severely alter the natural flow of the river below the dam and the dynamic, ecosystem-shaping processes of freeze-up and break-up. This massive change would ultimately destroy salmon spawning and rearing habitat, severely impacting our wild salmon populations. The dam would flood 40,000 acres of bear, caribou, and moose habitat, undeniably impacting one of Alaska’s most valued hunting and fishing regions.

The Su Dam is Not the Solution

The Susitna-Watana Dam is not a silver bullet for clean energy, carbon reduction, and lower energy rates. The Susitna hydro project would have detrimental impacts on Southcentral Alaska’s economy and ecology. Building a dam this size and scale in one of Alaska’s most valued river-based communities and economies remains costly, risky, and damaging. Striking Susitna-Watana from the conversation once and for all is a necessary next step for the state to take meaningful action toward truly creating a safe and thriving energy future.



For More Info:
susitnarivercoalition.org
email: info@susitnarivercoalition.org
Instagram: @susitnarivercoalition
FB: facebook.com/susitnarivercoalition

