

https://www.wvgazettemail.com/news/proposed-pump-storage-hydro-project-attracts-opposition/article_971ff33f-ac16-5bfe-ad53-1a73696e6f5c.html

Proposed pump storage hydro project attracts opposition

By Kate Mishkin Staff writer Dec 29, 2018

A proposed hydroelectric generating facility in Tucker County would drive away tourists and threaten endangered wildlife, says a citizen group that opposes the project.

Among other things, the \$1.2 billion pumped storage hydroelectric plant, called the [Big Run Pump Storage Hydro Project](#), would harm the Monongahela National Forest, [Friends of Blackwater](#) wrote last week.

"The Proposal would be a blow to the critical and vulnerable local outdoor recreation, scenic, and heritage recreation economy," Friends of Blackwater wrote to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, one of the entities that will have to sign off on the project.

The Big Run Pump Storage Hydro Project would be located on land owned by Western Pocahontas Properties and the Monongahela National Forest and involve building a closed-loop pump-storage hydroelectric generating facility with two new reservoirs, according to plans submitted to the FERC.

According to current plans, the upper reservoir would be built on Big Run, and the lower would be on Mill Run, a tributary to the Cheat River.

"The upper reservoir is being proposed on a rare and sensitive wetland area of the state, the Big Run Bog National Natural Landmark," Jacob Harrell, hydropower coordination biologist for the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, wrote in comments filed with the FERC. "This area is a large wetland complex of great importance that would be irrevocably destroyed should the upper reservoir be allowed to be constructed on it."

FreedomWorks, LLC, the Harpers Ferry company planning the project, first applied in August for a preliminary permit to study the feasibility of the project. FERC accepted the preliminary application on Oct. 29 and opened a 60-day window for comments and motions to intervene.

The project is in the public interest, the company said in its application, because it would create a way to store extra energy, particularly from intermittent renewable sources when demand is low, "while creating energy jobs in an economically depressed area which has lost energy related jobs in the transition away from coal."

Plus, it's a reliable, environmentally protective way to make the most of West Virginia's natural resources, FreedomWorks, LLC wrote.

That's not true, the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy wrote to the FERC, urging the commission to deny the preliminary permit. The shift to renewable energy is crucial, the group wrote, but this project would mean constructing "industrial-scale infrastructure in natural areas."

Pump-storage hydropower still uses electricity from renewables, natural gas, coal or fuels to power the pumps, meaning it's not truly renewable, the West Virginia Rivers Coalition wrote in comments to the FERC submitted Thursday.

The U.S. Department of the Interior echoed that in comments to the FERC, noting potentially adverse effects on the fisheries, migratory birds and the bald eagle, among other species. In its comments, the U.S. Forest Service noted the project could negatively affect the Big Run Bog National Natural Landmark in the Monongahela National Forest.

Tim Williamson, CEO of FreedomWorks, LLC, said Thursday he didn't plan to touch the Big Run Bog and would change the project's name. In response to the FERC comments, he submitted an updated draft study plan. The current estimated cost for project feasibility studies, the plan says, is \$1,170,000. FERC likely won't make a decision about the permit for many more weeks due to the partial government shutdown, Williamson said. Still, he said he believed the project was viable.

"I don't know. I'm still of the opinion that it could be. I don't see anything so far that's pulled it out of the realm of possibility," he said.

The status of the project might be contingent on whether it's right on top of previously mined property. Several environmental groups expressed concern in their comments that the project could cause acid mine drainage problems.

"That's really the key to this whole thing. If there's an underground mine underneath there, there's no chance in hell this thing's being built," Williamson said. "Because if it is, it's game over. It doesn't matter if there's flying squirrels in the area or not."

Reach Kate Mishkin at

kate.mishkin@wvgazette.com, 304-348-4843 or follow

[@katemishkin](#) on Twitter.

Kate Mishkin

Environment Reporter