

OPINION: Alaska’s government won’t do right by Eklutna salmon unless the public demands it

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OPINION: Alaska’s government won’t do right by Eklutna salmon unless the public demands it

By [Rick Sinnott](#)

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Water is released from the a dam on the upper Eklutna River on Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2021 near Eklutna Lake. The dam has been closed and the river has been dry for many years, with most of the water diverted to produce power and supply Anchorage with drinking water. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

The long-anticipated plan to restore Eklutna River’s salmon runs [is nearing completion](#). Unfortunately, disagreements have arisen among the stakeholders. To my everlasting disgust, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game opposes returning salmon to Eklutna Lake and its upstream tributaries — in other words, most of the watershed.

I worked for Fish and Game for 27 years. I know how much pressure a governor can put on a state agency. And I know that when Fish and Game doesn't support salmon habitat restoration, it's the governor's decision.

In 1991, the municipality, Chugach Electric and Matanuska Electric Association signed a sweetheart deal with the federal government. They were allowed to purchase the Eklutna hydroelectric project without conducting any environmental studies or restoration work for 30 years.

Why restoration? Because no water is allowed to escape from Eklutna Lake into Eklutna River: 90% leaves the lake by tunnel to generate less than 5% of the area's electricity. The remaining 10% leaves the lake by pipe to provide nearly 90% of Anchorage's domestic water supply.

None of the lake's water is allocated for salmon spawning and rearing. The entire Eklutna Valley ecosystem and the people who most depended on it were thrown out of whack in 1929 by damming the river, and have remained so ever since. It is not only an environmental tragedy; it's a cultural sucker punch. Eklutna village — which was founded, due to the salmon runs, long before Anchortown — has waited patiently for their return for three generations.

The 1991 contract required the electrical utilities to eventually restore the degraded ecosystem. Fish and Game and the Department of Natural Resources, manifested here by Chugach State Park, are state agencies whose primary missions involve protecting natural ecosystems for public use. Why are they the only two agencies that don't support getting salmon back into Eklutna Lake? See the second paragraph of this commentary.

Here's the ironic thing about Fish and Game's preference for the cheapest alternative. The governor, the commissioner and the Board of Game all forbid biologists from mentioning public opinions and preferences in board recommendations. Biologists are only allowed to comment on biological matters, even though management biologists often know a thing or two about local human uses and preferences. I've had my recommendations rewritten by headquarters and have been severely chastised by Board of Game members for incorporating social and economic factors in my analyses of proposed board actions. But in this case — Eklutna — the department has been encouraged to give greater weight to economics than habitat restoration.

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The restoration alternative that Fish and Game, Natural Resources, and the utilities prefer would add a spigot to the existing water pipeline about a mile below the Eklutna dam. This would leave one mile of the river dry. Salmon can't hold their breath and wriggle up the dry riverbed and over the dam.

Several federal agencies prefer building a fish ladder around the dam. The problem, as the utilities and — ahem — Fish and Game see it, is that this would be more expensive than a spigot.

No one expects Anchorage to diminish its domestic water supply, and it's only 10% of the total. The obvious choice would be for the utilities to divert some of their water into Eklutna River. If 90% of the lake's water is only providing 5% of the area's electricity couldn't we sacrifice a little of both to restore salmon to the lake?

While the utilities dawdled for 30 years, a conservation organization and the Native Village of Eklutna removed an abandoned lower dam in 2018, saving the utilities \$7.5 million in restoration costs. The Alaska Legislature is funding restoration of the Eklutna Lakeside Trail — which is often eroded by high water backed up by the utilities — to the tune of \$234,000. The utilities' reluctance to fix what they broke is costing us money.

According to the 1991 contract, Fish and Game and other agencies make recommendations to the governor based on natural resource concerns. The utilities will obviously make recommendations based on economics and alternative energy sources. The governor is supposed to weigh pros and cons and determine the scope of the restoration effort. But Gov. Mike Dunleavy is afraid to make a decision that adversely affects salmon if the public knows that the state's fisheries experts disapprove. So I believe he's forcing his commissioner to choose the cheapest fix, not the one that will enhance and sustain fish and game.

Without even asking, I know the fisheries and habitat biologists aren't on board, but the commissioner won't change his mind unless the governor tells him to. So don't bother calling Fish and Game. If you believe the Eklutna River deserves better, tell the governor to unmuzzle Fish and Game so its recommendations are based on biological, not political, science.

***Rick Sinnott** is a retired state wildlife biologist and current president of the Eklutna Valley Community Council. He lives in Chugiak.*

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