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Utilities reveal plan to restore most of Eklutna River, setting stage for public comment

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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)

Utilities in Southcentral Alaska have released their proposed [program](#) for restoring water and potentially salmon to the long-dammed Eklutna River, though an Alaska Native village and others say the plan doesn't go far enough.

The release of the draft fish and wildlife program Friday is a key step in a long-awaited effort to reduce the environmental harms of the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project, built by the federal government in 1955 and later sold to the utilities under the terms of a 1991 agreement that outlined the current process.

The system provides the cheapest electricity in the region, but an earthen dam at Eklutna Lake dries up most of the 12-mile river.



The draft program sets the stage for public meetings and comment opportunities early next year and a final decision by the governor next year, the utilities said in a prepared statement [announcing](#) the draft program.

Water could return to the river as early as 2027.

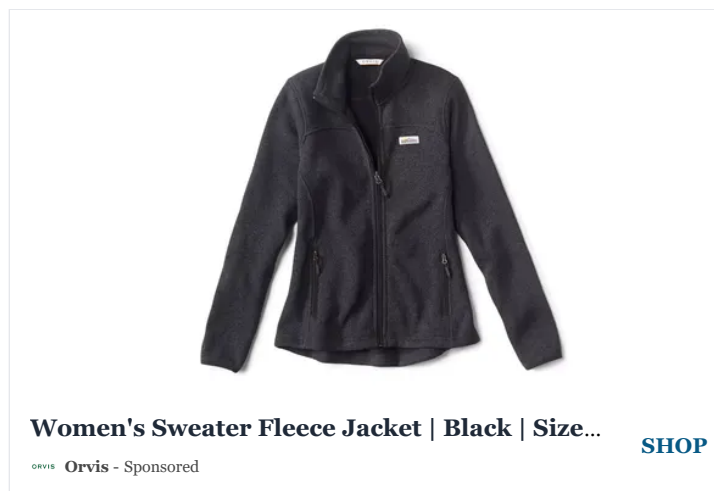
The Chugach and Matanuska electric associations and the municipality's [Anchorage Hydropower Utility](#) are proposing to release water a mile downstream of the dam, leaving 1 mile of the river dry.

The utilities would tap into the pipe that delivers Anchorage's drinking water, installing a valve and other infrastructure to divert flow without diminishing Anchorage's legally protected water. The proposed program will cost an estimated \$57 million, which includes monitoring studies and possible modifications to the planned flow of water.

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The plan could bring four species of salmon into miles of river habitat — but would likely do little to bring back sockeye salmon to the river, a species that typically rears in lakes. The Alaska Natural Resources and Fish and Game departments also support the valve alternative.

The [Native Village of Eklutna](#) and conservation groups said in a [statement](#) Wednesday that the river should be fully restored, with all salmon species able to reach the lake and tributaries above it. The village is located near the river's mouth 25 miles northeast of downtown Anchorage.



The village and the groups want the dam removed once renewable energy alternatives are developed to replace its hydroelectric power, they said in their statement.

That plan would allow the power companies time to transition away from Eklutna hydroelectric power, save ratepayers and taxpayers money on new infrastructure, and provide an effective and permanent solution that restores the Eklutna watershed, their statement said.

“Eklutna people have endured a dry river for the past 90 years,” said Aaron Leggett, president of the village of Eklutna, in the statement. “The (utilities’ portal option) does not connect Eklutna Lake to the Eklutna River and does not address the impacts on sockeye salmon that we believe is an important part of the mitigation process. Rather than a short-term fix that only deals with a small part of the problem, we want the river restored to something closer to its natural condition throughout the entire length.”

[Previously: [As effort to restore Eklutna River inches toward decision, disagreements remain over how far plan should go](#)]

The village and conservation groups had previously said they supported the idea of a replacement dam with features that would allow salmon to reach the lake. Some federal agencies had also taken that view.

Brad Meiklejohn, a senior Alaska representative for The Conservation Fund, said in an interview Wednesday that the groups and village no longer support a replacement dam.

Last year, the Anchorage Assembly had [called for](#) restoring the river all 12 miles to the lake, allowing fish passage to Eklutna Lake.

Assembly members last week had unsuccessfully requested a 90-day delay in the release of the draft program to resolve what it describes as “outstanding issues,” according to a [letter](#) from the Assembly sent to the dam owners.

The letter highlighted [disagreement](#) over how the project to replenish the river should move forward.

Eleven of 12 Assembly members signed the letter, saying the draft program is not consistent with policy [adopted](#) by the Anchorage Assembly, and is based on incomplete information.

The letter says that Mayor Dave Bronson’s administration has contravened the separation of powers and is “actively undermining” the established government-to-government consultation with the Native Village of Eklutna. It says the municipality is one owner of the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project.

Assembly Chair Christopher Constant, who signed the letter, said they believe Bronson’s administration has been negotiating in support of the portal valve. That doesn’t align with policy set by the Assembly, which is the policymaking branch of city government, he said.

The Assembly plans to have a work session with the Native village in December, he said.

The mayor’s office said in an emailed statement that the timeline associated with the 1991 agreement calls for a period to resolve differences and seek and incorporate comments from parties, the public and the village.

“The administration is committed to working in good faith over the coming months to attempt to resolve differences ahead of the release of the final program,” the statement said.

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The utilities’ representatives have said their preferred alternative is the most economical and strikes a balance between habitat restoration and impacts to the hydropower project.

The release of the draft program opens the door to meetings in December between the utilities and entities that signed the 1991 agreement, the state of Alaska, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

The Native Village of Eklutna will also be involved in those discussions, which could lead to changes in the plan.

In mid-January, the utilities will hold two public meetings in Anchorage and two in the Mat-Su.

The meetings will be “open house style with a brief presentation followed by an opportunity for participants to meet with the Project Owners and their technical team, ask questions, and submit comments,” the draft program says. “Members of the public will also have an opportunity to submit comments via email to info@eklutnahydro.com.”

Recognizing the meetings and public comments will lead to changes in the proposed plan, the project owners will submit a final fish and wildlife program to the governor in April, the statement from the utilities said.

“Following another 60-day comment period and project owner responses to public comments, the governor is expected to make a decision by October 2024,” the statement said.



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