

# Tribes cheer withdrawal of 2 Little Colorado hydropower projects but fear a 3rd



A developer has withdrawn two of the three proposals to build a series of hydroelectric dams in the Little Colorado River watershed, projects that had drawn opposition from several tribes and environmentalists.

Phoenix-based Pumped Hydro Storage LLC relinquished preliminary permits for the [Salt Trail Canyon](#) and [Little](#)

[Colorado River](#) proposals on July 26. The company told the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission that "the study requirements and eventual environmentalist opposition makes investing resources in this project a very high risk."

The company left in place an application for a third proposal in nearby Big Canyon.

The Salt Trail Canyon project would have involved building two dams on the Little Colorado River four miles upstream from the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers and about 16 miles northwest of Cameron, in the western reach of the Navajo Nation.

The two dams would have created reservoirs to generate electricity on an as-needed basis. The upper reservoir would have served as an aquatic "battery" as the water flowed down a 3,000-foot drop through turbines, which would then pump water back up to the upper reservoir to recreate the storage.

The U.S. Department of Energy refers to this system as an ["open loop"](#) system because the dams and reservoirs are connected to a naturally flowing water source.

That area is held as sacred or culturally vital to several tribes, including the Navajo, Hopi and Zuni peoples. The Little Colorado River is also prime habitat for the threatened humpback chub and other species. Several tribes and

environmental groups filed objections to the project.

The [Little Colorado River Project](#) was similar to the [Salt Trail Canyon](#) project but was located farther away from the confluence.

The third proposal, which is awaiting action by the commission, is known as the [Big Canyon Project](#). It would be a "closed loop" system, with no existing surface water source involved. The project would consist of a 400-foot-high concrete dam in Big Canyon, a side canyon to the Little Colorado River and three smaller dams above the canyon. The four dams would require 73,000 acre-feet of water to operate.

The complex would also include ancillary structures like concrete spillways — known as penstocks — a large concrete powerhouse with nine 400-kilowatt pump-turbine generators and a 14-mile-long transmission line to connect with existing lines that served the now-closed Navajo Generating Station.

The company proposed drilling wells to bring groundwater to fill the reservoirs using three wells with 700-horsepower pumps. The system would work at night to generate electricity, which Pumped Hydro Storage said would supplement solar power generated during the day.

The company estimated that the project could generate 7,900 gigawatt-hours per year.

**Power project:** [Facing concerns about damming Little Colorado River, company looks elsewhere](#)

## Hydropower is 'a proven technology'

Steve Irwin, manager of Pumped Hydro Storage, said the power would be offered on the wholesale electric market.

He said he thinks the Big Canyon project will be more acceptable to the Navajo Nation than the other two, in part because, "the Big Canyon project would remove the fish issue."

He acknowledged that building dams on the Little Colorado River would be difficult due to environmental and tribal objections.

"We didn't look at them closely enough," Irwin said.

He also said energy storage is already becoming an issue in renewables. "Solar is only good for about six hours," said Irwin. "But utilities need to supply power 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

He said he thinks utility-grade lead-acid batteries aren't the answer. "They're dangerous," Irwin said. "They blow up, they burn up." Hydro storage is a proven technology to store energy until it's needed, he said.

Also, Irwin said, "Navajo Nation owns the transmission line from the old Navajo Generating Station and it's not being used now."

Irwin said it is probable that non-potable water would be pumped to supply the dams, but he admitted that water suitable for human and animal use might be found when the wells start drilling.

He also said the project would create jobs for local Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe members, since the Moencopi substation that services the Navajo transmission line is on Hopi tribal land.

## **'We're going to fight this'**

Rita Bilagody, spokesperson for [Save the Confluence](#), said she believed the power generated from the dams, if they happen, won't benefit her community.

"It won't go to us," she said. "It's meant to go to people down at Phoenix, Las Vegas or California."

The Arizona Republic asked Irwin if any of the generated electricity would be allocated to the Navajo Nation since access to electricity or running water has long been in short supply there. Irwin said he believed the U.S. should enact a project like the [Tennessee Valley Authority](#) to serve the tribes



in the region with water and utility services.

The Navajo Nation submitted a letter [opposing the Big Canyon project](#) in July 2020, but Irwin said he has met with leaders since then and believes he may gain more support for the dam project.

Opponents of all three projects cheered the firm's decision.

"Any of the three dam proposals would have likely impacted the flow of those milky turquoise blue waters through the Little Colorado River and down onto the confluence of the Colorado," said Amanda Podmore, Grand Canyon director at the Grand Canyon Trust.

Podmore would like to see all three, including the Big Canyon project, go away.

"We're particularly concerned about the amount of groundwater that they'll require to fill four different reservoirs," she said.

Also, she said, evaporation loss at the Big Canyon site would lead to even more groundwater pumping, since Pumped Hydro Storage is proposing a pumped hydro reservoir project in a very arid region already undergoing a long-term drought.

The Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, which operates the Navajo Nation's domestic and livestock water systems, has declared

[stage two drought restrictions](#) in its service area. Among other directives, the authority put tight limits on water withdrawals from public wells and water stations to 500 gallons per day.

Bilagody said water is precious to Navajo people.

"Especially during the drought, all the precious water that we need to survive, just as the four-legged relatives need this water, is being rationed for what people need for their livestock," she said. "The drought is not going away, which means water will become even more precious."

The grassroots group, composed of Navajos who live near the confluence of the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers, has worked for years to preserve their land from development. In 2017, their advocacy helped [stop a controversial 420-acre resort project at the confluence](#). The Grand Canyon Escalade would have included a tram to the Canyon floor at the East Rim, retail development and a hotel.

Bilagody likened the Navajos' effort to keep their land and water from being taken or destroyed to the Havasupai Tribe's efforts, aided by her group and other Native peoples, to [stop a uranium mine](#) they say could imperil their ancestral lands and waters.

"This company, like Irwin's, is hell-bent on ramming the project through," she said. "The Navajo Nation still suffers

from the legacy of uranium from the 1950s, the 60s and the 70s."

Bilagody attributed this and other efforts to develop tribal lands to "money, which is always on the minds of irresponsible developers."



She also asked why she and her neighbors had to continue fighting developers intent on taking what little land Navajo people have left.

"Some of these developers are just trying to desecrate the lands without any thought of people that live there," she said. "(Irwin has) been told so many times that no, we cannot support this."

But, Bilagody said, "Mr. Irwin doesn't realize how much we love the Earth, how much we care for her and how much we appreciate the creatures of the earth, our relatives."

She said despite Irwin's statements that the firm hopes the



new Big Canyon project would be approved, "we're still here. We're still going to fight about this and raise our objections."

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