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Feds Urged to Deny Permit for 200-foot Dam on San Francisco River on Arizona-New Mexico Border

PHOENIX— Conservation groups and business leaders [urged](#) a federal commission today to deny a preliminary permit for a 200-foot-tall dam planned for the San Francisco River at the Arizona-New Mexico border. The San Francisco River Pumped Storage Project, proposed within protected areas of two national forests, would damage or destroy dozens of miles of critical habitat for five endangered species.

The [project](#), which requires approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, would pump water from a new reservoir on the San Francisco River to a second one atop the adjacent canyon rim, generating electricity and revenue from downhill return flows when electricity prices are higher.

“The free-flowing San Francisco River is one of the last, best cradles of biodiversity in the Southwest. This disastrous project would be its end,” said Taylor McKinnon, a public lands campaigner at the Center for Biological Diversity. “We’ll fight like hell to ensure this boondoggle is never built.”

The [project](#) includes two reservoirs, power lines, buildings, roads, generators and other infrastructure. These would be located within protected roadless areas, the lower San Francisco River wilderness study area and portions of the river eligible for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers system. Management plans governing the Apache-Sitgreaves and Gila national forests call for those areas to remain in relatively pristine condition.

“Many of our rivers in the Southwest have been dammed, diverted and dried up, so rivers such as the San Francisco that have flowing water, especially year-round flows, are precious and critical to sustaining all kinds of life, including threatened and endangered species. That’s why we can’t support this pumped hydro storage project,” said Sandy Bahr, director of Sierra Club's Grand Canyon Chapter. “This project presents a false choice between protecting our rivers and storing energy. We can do both, but not with this project.”

“To the aquatic, riparian and forest wildlife, indigenous communities, and outdoor recreationists that rely on protections we have already collectively given to the lower San Francisco River, its endangered and threatened species, and its surrounding recognized wilderness and roadless areas, dam construction and operation is intensively destructive,” said Kelly Burke, executive director of Tucson-based Wild Arizona. “A dam is a dam, and two dams are worse, regardless of the flashy technological context. This pumped storage proposal lacks any basis in reality, hydrologic, geomorphic, economic, environmental, societal or otherwise. It should be denied at the outset.”

Tailwaters downstream from the San Francisco River dam would damage or destroy 44 river miles of proposed critical habitat for a threatened species, the narrow-headed garter snake, and 28 river miles of designated critical habitat for endangered loach minnows and spikedace. Recovery plans for both fish say that natural river flows are critical to their survival and competitive advantage against non-native fish. Loach minnow have been extirpated in tailwaters on the Gila and Salt rivers.

Separately, the proposed reservoir would eliminate about 11 miles of critical habitat for loach minnow, spikedace and narrow-headed garter snakes. It would flood important habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher and Mexican garter snake. Recovery plans for the endangered fish state that neither species can survive in lake habitats.

“The San Francisco River has some of the most intact gallery forest and riparian habitat in the West. It also has several imperiled fish species, and provides vital habitat for such wide-ranging animals as puma, Mexican wolf, javelina and coatimundi,” said John Davis, executive director of The Rewilding Institute. “The San Francisco River and the larger Gila River watershed should be kept as whole and free-flowing as possible. No new dams or diversions should be allowed. The Gila, San Francisco, Blue, Black and Mimbres rivers should be protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.”

“The San Francisco River is a well-known destination across the Southwest for recreationalists of all backgrounds,” said Logan Glasenapp, staff attorney with New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. “We are opposed to any effort to erect unneeded, understudied, and unproven structures across a river known for its wild, scenic, and recreational qualities.”

“As an outdoor gear company we support conservation of the limited resources for outstanding outdoor recreational opportunities such as those found in the beautiful San Francisco River area,” said Danny Giovale, president of Kahtoola in Flagstaff. “I personally spent nearly a week there exploring this incredible area last spring. A project like this would be inappropriate and shortsighted.”

“This proposal is the latest threat to the San Francisco River and its riparian ecosystem,” said Allyson Siwik, executive director of the Gila Conservation Coalition. “In addition to the diversion project contemplated under the Arizona Water Settlements Act, this project would further impact the natural flow of the San Francisco critical to the survival of several threatened and endangered species.”

The San Francisco River Pump Storage Project is proposed by Pumped Hydro Storage LLC. The Phoenix-based company has proposed two similar [projects](#) on the Little Colorado River that would damage or destroy that river’s entire critical habitat for endangered humpback chub.

The groups and businesses that filed today’s objection with the commission are the Center for Biological Diversity, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, Wild Arizona, The Rewilding Institute, Kahtoola, Gila Conservation Coalition and Sierra Club.

Wild Arizona is a statewide conservation organization working to protect, link together, and restore wild lands and waters across Arizona and beyond. We pursue this mission for the enrichment and health of all generations, and to ensure Arizona's native plants and animals a lasting home in wild nature.



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