

Hydroelectric Energy: Killing the Green Energy Giant

By Ryan M Yonk

In the mid-twentieth century green energy was meeting nearly 40 percent of the United States' energy needs through hydropower generation; a level that well exceeds most current goals called for by environmental groups for renewable energy production and substantially higher than any time in the recent past. Hydroelectricity has since experienced sharp decline in the United States, it currently producing only 6 percent of the nation's energy. Hydropower has significant demonstrated ability to produce affordable, green energy.

Although the potential of hydropower is great, environmental concerns and the concerted effort of special interest groups continue to hinder development. Environmental groups like the Sierra Club have been successful in lobbying the federal government to make it difficult, expensive, and largely impossible to develop this plentiful source of alternative energy. Currently legislation prevents hydropower plant siting on nearly all federal lands. This legislation includes the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the National Wilderness Act, and the Energy Policy Act of 1992, among others. The most cited environmental concerns are that hydro development may disrupt the natural habitat of protected fish species like salmon and cause ecological changes in waterways, leading to under-water plant deforestation.

Until legislation is streamlined and activist groups limit their opposition to this form of green energy generation, the potential of this substantial energy source will go untapped. Further, even those sites currently able to produce hydropower have been severely curtailed due to environmental groups' lobbying and intervention. The Glen Canyon Dam at Lake Powell is one such example.

In 1869 John Wesley Powell discovered the beautiful but rugged Glen Canyon region of the Colorado River in southern Utah and northern Arizona. Once home to the prehistoric Anasazi and Fremont people, today the canyon's walls are submerged beneath 9 trillion gallons of water. What is now Lake Powell originated amidst opposition from environmental groups who sought to protect the region's cultural and natural characteristics. The history of the Glen Canyon Dam illustrates the difficulties associated with hydropower generation and demonstrates how backlash from environmentalists can create significant barriers to the development and continuing production of alternative energy from sources like hydropower.

Following the Colorado River Compact of 1922, construction for a dam at Glen Canyon was authorized. Over 20 years later, the Bureau of Reclamation identified Glen Canyon as a desirable site with promising hydropower capabilities. This spurred a wave of environmental backlash, particularly from the Sierra Club, and protests slowed construction of many proposed dams. Amid years of heated controversy, Glen Canyon Dam was completed in 1963. Environmental pressure to remove the dam continued until, in 1989, the Secretary of Interior requested an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EIS resulted in a reduction of the dam's energy output, which pleased environmental groups but failed to pacify them. Debates, protests and the occasional threat to sue continue today about whether the dam should be 'decommissioned,' removed, or kept running.

The case of the Glen Canyon dam is a classic example of the green vs. green struggle. Although hydroelectric power represents a promising form of clean, renewable energy, environmentalist groups like the Sierra Club struggle relentlessly to prevent the construction of new dams and increase the decommissioning of dams across the country. Environmental concerns can and should be taken into account when constructing dams or equipping them with hydropower generating facilities. This should not require, however, that projects become so burdensome they are discouraged from ever being undertaken in the first place.

Policy Recommendations:

- Streamline legislation to make hydropower siting more economically and politically feasible.
- Develop policies that balance environmental concerns with the need to produce inexpensive, green energy.

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