

Citing environmental worries, Gov. rejects Bear Lake hydroelectric plan

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The Hook Canyon hydroelectric dam proposed for the east side of Bear Lake between North Eden and South Eden appears dead in the water.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. on Tuesday announced the Division of State Parks and Recreation won't negotiate an easement necessary for the project, citing a need to balance the benefits of such development against "unnecessary disruption" of the surrounding area.

The action likely ends a Logan hydroelectric engineering firm's efforts to gain Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approval for pumping about 21,000 acre-feet of water out of Bear Lake to generate power for sale during peak-demand hours.

Symbiotics LLC, in arguing for the project, pointed to hydroelectricity's renewable energy potential and claimed the project could meet about 85 percent of Utah's current peak energy demands if used in concert with conservation efforts.

But others argued the project actually would have resulted in a net loss of electricity because it would take more energy to pump the water to the storage reservoir than the falling water could produce.

Biologists and wildlife advocates have said the power turbines would churn the calcium carbonate that lies at the bottom of the 200,000-year-old lake, destroying its azure color and suffocating the eggs of four endemic species of fish found only in Bear Lake.

The lake might never freeze because of the turbulence, which could cause relentless fog, forever alter the tourism industry that supports the region and even contribute to climate change.

"The proposal would actually cause a net gain of carbon dioxide emissions," said John Harja, director of the state Public Lands Policy Coordination Office.

Harja said the governor consulted with all the agencies in the Utah Department of Natural Resources and heard enough about the threats to the lake's water quality, wildlife and recreation to convince him to scuttle the project.

Symbiotics spokesman Greg Kliever, however, said the company believes Huntsman acted on misinformation.

"We're disappointed that the governor has chosen to support 400 vocal people opposed to the project rather than 400,000 people along the Wasatch Front," he said.

It's unclear what the company might do to counter Huntsman's move. Harja said FERC can grant applicants the power of eminent domain, but not on recreational property.

Claudia Cottle, a co-director of project opponent Bear Lake Watch, said she hopes FERC is out of the picture for good.

"If we had to battle this in the FERC process, this could have gone on for years and years," she said.

"They don't really care about how many people vacation there or what color the lake is. That's not their job," she added.

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