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Bear Lake residents oppose power plant

Company says dam project will produce clean electricity

By **Stephen Speckman**

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A company's proposal to produce what it says will be "scarce, clean, peak-hour electricity" by building a dam and hydroelectric plant near Bear Lake in Hook Canyon is being met with resistance from some of the area's more well-known residents.

"In all the time we've been around Bear Lake, it's the most frightening thing I've seen yet," Merlin Olsen said over the phone Friday from his home in Park City.

Olsen made himself available to media to talk about Bear Lake and a proposal by Symbiotics LLC.

Olsen, 67, was born in Logan and graduated from Utah State University, where he also earned a master's degree in economics. In the NFL he played for the Los Angeles Rams and later gained TV fame as a character on "Little House on the Prairie."

As a child, Olsen said he couldn't wait for visits to Bear Lake. One of the first cabins built on Bear Lake belonged to the grandfather of Olsen's wife, Susan, to whom he's been married for 46 years.

The cabin, which Olsen said is still in the family, remains a popular destination for the Olsens' children and grandchildren, who spend lots of time during the summer months boating, fishing and relaxing on the banks of Bear Lake's clear blue waters.

"That's a special place for us as a family," he said. "I have lots of emotional ties to the lake."

Olsen has been involved since the early 1990s with a group called Bear Lake Watch, and he's currently president of the group. He is not the only sports celebrity to have a stake in Bear Lake's well being, however.

Former NBA coach Dick Motta operates a bed and breakfast on the Idaho side of Bear Lake. Utah Jazz assistant coach Phil Johnson spends time at his cabin on the lake and his wife is on the Bear Lake Watch board.

A host of critics, including Olsen, are already worried that Symbiotics' dam and pump project will change the lake's look and alter its ecosystem by disturbing Bear Lake's bottom. Symbiotics also has been accused of wanting to do the project primarily as a money-making scheme, buying energy at a low price during the night to operate its facility and selling electricity at a higher cost to consumers during the day.

"It's not the right project for a lake like Bear Lake," Olsen said. He and others believe there will even be a net loss of energy in the marketplace when factoring how much power the plant will consume for its operations compared to how much electricity it will sell.

Symbiotics has filed a pre-application document with the Federal Regulatory Commission. Company officials say all the electricity produced would be used along the increasingly in-demand Wasatch Front. Unlike coal-fired power plants, Symbiotics says its project will not produce air pollution or emit carbon dioxide, believed to be a major cause of global warming.

The company's plan is to do a two-year environmental study that will include looking at the impact of tunneling under the lake to draw enough water during the night that will reduce the lake's level by three inches.

Olsen is worried the tunneling process will damage the lake by stirring up centuries worth of a fine

sediment at the bottom and disturbing the ecosystem, in particular the habitat for four species of fish found nowhere else in the world. The long-term impact of Symbiotics' plan could mean those fish will one day become federally listed as endangered, thereby creating "chaos" in the way people use and access the lake.

The plan calls for storing water in a 1,210 acre-feet reservoir, behind a 160-foot dam, and then pumping it back into the lake during the day to generate electrical power through 14 reversible pump-turbines. About nine miles of transmission lines would need to be installed, which Symbiotics said would likely be buried underground. With that, Symbiotics officials say the Hook Canyon Pumped Storage Project would have a minimal impact on the environment.

Olsen hopes that as Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. gets involved in examining the project that he will conclude the plan is not right for Bear Lake. If Huntsman still likes the project in theory, Olsen said he could suggest other lakes in Utah with less fragile ecosystems that might be able to tolerate the impacts.

Logan-based Symbiotics was created in 2001 by Ecosystems Research Institute and Northwest Power Services and it currently has 30 active projects around the country. Symbiotics claims on its Web site that it selects projects that can be built in an environmentally sound manner while promoting environmental stewardship.

"I'd like to believe that," Olsen said about applying those claims to the company's Bear Lake proposal. "I think the realities are otherwise."

E-mail: sspeckman@desnews.com

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