

Powerful interests converge on river

Duke faces wish-list on Catawba development

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The oldest of its 13 hydroelectric stations on the Catawba River is nearly a century old now, and Duke Power's license to operate them was granted during the Eisenhower administration.

Duke steps into a new world today, with the first in a series of public meetings. Renewing its hydro license, which expires in 2008, will mean scrutiny by agencies that didn't exist and laws not yet written in 1958.



JEFF WILLHELM

Duke Energy is updating the Oxford Dam at Lake Hickory.

For the public, it's the chance of a lifetime to influence use of the region's most prominent natural resource. Duke's new license will last at least 30 years.

Government agencies, environmental and conservation groups will push Duke for more fish-friendly waters and recreational amenities.

They'll ask Duke to put water back in a long-dry reach of river, South Carolina's Great Falls, and might press the company to do the unthinkable -- take out a dam.

Negotiations are likely to stray outside the license's jurisdiction, to shoreline Duke doesn't own but conservationists covet for parks, greenways and river buffers.

"We've learned this relicensing process, although it may seem long and drawn-out, really isn't enough time to assess the multitude of issues involved in a project the size of the Catawba-Wateree," said Dick Christie of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

Array of interests

The Catawba is one of the nation's largest hydroelectric projects. The 220-mile basin winds through 14 Carolinas counties, supplies drinking water to more than 1 million people and produces half of Duke's electricity. Hydro relicensings are also due in 2008 on the Yadkin-Pee Dee River, east of Charlotte. Those licenses are held by Alcoa Power Generating Inc. and Progress Energy.

While Duke has its roots in hydropower, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, known as FERC, now gives the environment and recreation as much weight as electric generation.

The Catawba-Wateree Relicensing Coalition involves 38 local governments, state and federal agencies and interest groups who will deal with Duke in a three-year marathon of

meetings, studies and negotiations. Duke hopes to win broad public approval of the license application it will file in 2006.

The coalition's president, Vicki Taylor, envisions the Catawba a decade from now:

"We would have tracts of land adjacent to water preserved for recreational use, with hiking trails, biking trails, perhaps greenways," said Taylor, a lawyer and consultant who lives on Lake Norman.

"We would have more than four beaches on 11 lakes. We would have access for local people who don't own boats. We'd have an equitable system of water consumption, both discharges and withdrawals. All the narrow coves would be precluded from having multiple boat slips.

"And if we can pick out the few undeveloped tracts that are left that would make parks, I don't think anyone would ever regret it; Duke would never regret it. Would anyone regret preserving Central Park?"

Duke promises to at least listen to every topic broached. Mark Oakley, Duke's Catawba relicensing leader, said the process will be "inclusive from beginning to end."

"We feel that by far the best outcomes are those that we can mutually agree to," Oakley said. "If there are instances on which we can't see eye-to-eye, we'll have to file the data and recommendations to FERC. But we will do that having absolutely exhausted our collaboration efforts."

Controlling flow

A priority in relicensing will be changing the way Duke releases water from the three dams - - at lakes James, Wylie and Wateree -- that control free-flowing stretches of river.

Duke's hydroelectric plants now provide mostly peak power -- the extra electricity needed when thousands of air conditioners start humming on a hot July afternoon. When the hydros come on, typically for a few hours a day, reservoir water surges through their turbines and downstream. When the plants shut down, the river subsides.

State agencies want Duke to release a little water all the time. The amount would vary with seasons, the way nature does it. The river would consistently have more water in it, offering fish more space to feed, reproduce and grow.

The cost to Duke: reduced ability to generate peaking power, and the expense of buying replacement power elsewhere. But the company has previously agreed to continuous flows on South Carolina's Broad and Saluda rivers.

More water could help shad, herring and sturgeon, which migrate upstream to spawn, make it farther up the Wateree River, which flows from the last of Duke's reservoirs, Lake Wateree. If fish numbers grow, agencies could press for devices to help them get around dams and move farther upstream on the Catawba.

Duke will also have to pass muster with water-quality standards, particularly the oxygen levels and water temperatures vital to healthy fish.

Other big-ticket items expected to appear on the relicensing table:

- A drought-contingency plan. Duke got good reviews for conserving lake water during the past four years of drought. But state agencies want something in writing. The plan would require Duke to withhold water if drought conditions and lake inflows worsen.
- Recreational access to the lakes and rivers. The Catawba's 1,700-mile shoreline has dozens of boat launches, but far fewer places to fish from shore, swim safely, hike or camp.
- Shoreline development, which can harm fish habitat and increase the pollutants running into the water. Critics say Duke's management plans will allow far too many homes and businesses.

Development is a thorny issue because Duke's hydro license doesn't cover the land surrounding its lakes. But advocacy groups and some government agencies insist that doesn't absolve Duke of responsibility for development, much of it by a sister subsidiary of Duke Energy, Crescent Resources.

Telling Crescent what to do, Oakley said, would create a "dangerous precedent" that threatens other private landowners.

Trust-building and negotiation workshops are scheduled, Taylor said.

Public Meetings*

- *Today, Holiday Inn Select I-40, 1385 Lenoir-Rhyne Blvd. SE, Hickory*
- *Wednesday, Mooresville Citizens Center, 215 N. Main St.*
- *March 19, Best Western Camden West, 850 U.S. 1 South, Lugoff, S.C.*
- *March 24, Baxter Hood Center, York Technical College, 452 S. Anderson Road, Rock Hill*

**All meetings at 4 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.*