



The Enterprise

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Overflow crowd shows up for Condit Dam talk

Story by: Jesse Burkhardt

Next time, schedule a larger meeting room.

On the evening of Jan. 11, area residents turned out en masse to hear a presentation from a PacifiCorp representative regarding the Portland utility's proposal to remove Condit Dam on the White Salmon River. But the meeting room at the White Salmon Community Library was so full that those standing along the sides and at the back of the room could barely move without bumping into someone. The crowd was estimated at about 125, and there were only 70 seats available.

The event was organized by Columbia Riverkeeper, a Gorge-based environmental organization, and PacifiCorp, owner of the dam.

PacifiCorp spokesman Dave Kvamme said the purpose of the meeting was two-fold.

"We wanted to show an overview of how we planned to go about the dam removal process, and we wanted to share the experiences at other dam removals in the past," Kvamme said.

Todd Olson, PacifiCorp's Condit Dam project manager, discussed the proposal for the dam and answered questions from the audience. The crowd also watched a short video that promoted the benefits of dam removal. The film -- Taking a Second Look: Communities and Dam Removal -- focused on the experiences of three communities that have had dams taken out in recent years. The video was created by Trout Unlimited and American Rivers, two organizations that generally support dam removal projects.

PacifiCorp has signed a "settlement agreement" with a variety of agencies and organizations to remove the 1913-era dam. The utility has set a target date of October 2008 to begin removal.

The reason why PacifiCorp agreed to removal of the dam is a basic one, Olson said.

"It comes down to the cost of fish passage. It's an economic decision," he explained.

Olson dismissed speculation that because the dam is about 95 years old, it has become a hazardous structure.

"Let me start by stating that Condit Dam is not unsafe," Olson said. "It's a safe dam and not obsolete. It's operating to its intent and it meets public safety standards. But the dam is not permanent. It has a finite life. It's not a matter of will it come out, the question is when. From the minute it went up, that concrete started to degrade."

Husum resident Jim Rhoads said he did not believe the age of the dam was a legitimate factor in discussions about whether to remove the dam or not.

"Concrete dams are going to last a long time," Rhoads said. "That dam will be here 50 years from now, and that's the length of the FERC license. It's misleading to suggest we should get rid of the dam because it's old."

To remove the dam, Olson explained that PacifiCorp anticipates drilling a 12 foot by 18 foot tunnel into the dam, and the hole would then be filled with dynamite and blown. The resulting breach in the dam would drain the Northwestern Lake reservoir in about six hours, Olson said.

Olson admitted that the drained reservoir will appear to be a mess at first. He showed a slide of an artist's sketch that showed a bare, muddy area with dead and fallen trees.

"Yes, in the first year it will look like this -- but the long-term benefits will outweigh the short term impacts," he said. "PacifiCorp won't just walk away, we will do revegetation and bank stabilization."

Someone in the audience asked what would happen if the costs to rehabilitate the landscape and the downstream portion of the White Salmon River go over PacifiCorp's proposed "cost cap" of approximately \$20 million.

Olson explained that the utility could ask the parties who signed the settlement agreement to come in with additional funding to help meet those costs.

"In a worst case scenario, where everything goes totally south and costs are extremely higher than the estimates for whatever reason, there is an opportunity for the settlement parties to sit down and figure out a solution," Olson said. "If they can't come up with one, PacifiCorp goes back to the dam relicensing process."

Another audience member asked about impacts to existing fish if the dam goes out.

"That area is one of the best rainbow trout fisheries in the state," he said. "What would we sacrifice that for? The film is a nice propaganda piece, but it's irrelevant to Condit Dam."

Many in the crowd reacted to his statement with applause.

Columbia Riverkeeper's speaker at the event, Brent Foster, explained that Condit Dam was especially critical to salmon and steelhead runs because of where it's located.

"This is one of the most important dams on the entire Columbia River system," Foster said. "There is only one dam below it [Bonneville Dam], and with every dam you lose about 10 percent of the juvenile fish."

According to Columbia Riverkeeper leaflet distributed at the meeting, the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife has estimated that removing Condit Dam "could re-establish runs of about 700 steelhead adults, 4,000 spring Chinook adults, 1,100 fall Chinook adults, and 2,000 coho adults."

Another person asked whether the home owners around the lake would gain more property if and when the lake is drained.

"We have ownership of the land under the lake," Olson said. "Once it's de-watered, it's PacifiCorp's land. PacifiCorp has not decided the disposition of the land. We might sell it, but we're not sure."

Olson added that all the cabins on PacifiCorp land are "on short-term leases."

Someone asked about reports that the Klickitat Public Utility District (PUD) is moving to take over Condit Dam via the power of eminent domain.

Kvamme responded that PacifiCorp received a letter from the PUD in the summer of 2006 saying the PUD intended to proceed to take the project.

"Since then, we haven't heard from them. There has been no offer to buy the project, nor has anyone taken steps to condemn the dam," Kvamme said. "Eminent domain is a legal proceeding. They would have to find there's a public necessity, and cost/benefit for their own customers to see if it made sense to them. They did a study earlier, and it didn't make sense. We were surprised when we got the letter."

Foster said he thought any effort by the PUD to take over the dam would be a big mistake.

"From a ratepayer's standpoint, the PUD would be stepping into a completely uncertain situation that may cost huge amounts of money," Foster said. "PacifiCorp walked away from the dam because it didn't pencil out."

After the meeting, Kvamme said PacifiCorp still anticipates beginning removal in the fall of next year.

"October 2008 is still our timeline, and still doable," Kvamme said.

Jim Rhoads, who does not believe Condit Dam should be removed, said he thought the meeting went well.

"I think there was a substantial portion of the audience really there to learn something, and I thought there was a good exchange of information," Rhoads said. "It was well behaved and there was sharing of information to let people make up their own minds."

However, he thought the movie shown at the event was inappropriate.

"I almost jumped up," Rhoads said. "It should have been obvious that the three dams they picked there were totally the opposite of Condit. They were all small, all earthen dams, and only one produced power. They didn't relate to Condit Dam at all."

Rhoads stressed that he does not have a blanket opposition to dam removal.

"They made a good point that there are thousands of these dams that are defunct and not in use, and should in all probability come out," Rhoads explained. "I don't have a problem with that. But they're nothing like Condit Dam."

Foster pointed out near the beginning of the meeting that there has been an average of one dam a day built in the United States since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Rhoads added that he believes it is misleading for those who support removing Condit Dam to continue to say a date to do so has already been set.

"They keep saying the dam is `scheduled to be removed,' but are ignoring one very important party -- the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. It's not `scheduled' for removal," Rhoads explained. "They said it was `scheduled' to come out in 2006, but it didn't come out. So they shouldn't say it's scheduled to be removed, because it's not."