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Lower Snake River Dams in Jeopardy; Make Your Voice Heard

The region's clean and equitable energy future hangs in the balance of a federal process that will conclude this year, and you can influence the outcome.

A court-ordered analysis will help determine the future of the four lower Snake River dams. It is the first time in nearly 20 years that the federal government has examined the value these dams provide and the costs to society if they are breached.

The process is the Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement—or CRSO EIS. The draft report is expected to be released in or after February, 2020, and a 45-day public comment period will follow.

Why This Matters

Our region is facing a major challenge. In their sincere effort to help fight the effects of climate change, Northwest electric utilities announced plans for the retirement of thousands of megawatts of coal-fired generation throughout the next decade.

It takes roughly 1,000 megawatts to power a city the size of Seattle, so thousands of megawatts are a big deal.

Even with newly planned renewable generation, such as wind and solar, many Northwest energy experts are forecasting a high probability of regional blackouts.

Perhaps an even greater

threat is the possibility of a repeat of the 2000-2001 Western Energy Crisis where utilities had to compete for scarce energy supply. That historic event resulted in the loss of thousands of living-wage jobs in the Northwest and huge, prolonged spikes in electricity bills.

Given the region's affordable housing shortage, an electricity price spike is something we cannot let happen again. Our most vulnerable communities can least afford it.

Amid this uncertain future, the federal government is seeking your feedback about the future of the four lower Snake River dams.

The truth is we need the hydroelectricity from these dams to prevent regional blackouts and help fight the climate crisis. The four lower Snake River dams provide an average of 1,000 MW of carbon-free electricity and at times can produce as much as 3,000 MW.

The dams' ability to store water and release it past turbines to generate electricity when needed is also critical. Wind and solar power are intermittent resources. This means they can fluctuate greatly on a minute-to-minute basis, based on wind, cloud cover and sunshine. However, the grid must have a perfect balance of supply and demand every second, or blackouts

can occur. The lower Snake River dams help provide that balance to keep the grid safe.

How You Can Help

Now more than ever, it is critical that voices of support for the Lower Snake River dams are heard as well. Your input during the public comment period matters now more than ever, and your action—or lack thereof—could greatly influence the future of our region.

By writing to the federal agencies, you will help them understand the importance of the lower Snake River dams and ensure we can achieve a clean and equitable future.

This is your opportunity to make a difference!

Look for details on the CRSO EIS at www.nwd.usace.army.mil/CRSO/.

The draft EIS should be released in February or shortly after. The best way to keep informed is to submit your email address to info@crso.info and ask to be added to the notifications list.

We encourage you to also follow Northwest RiverPartners on social media @nwrivertpartners and visit www.nwrivertpartners.org. ■

Kurt Miller is the executive director of Northwest RiverPartners. This article first ran in the February 2020 NWPPA Bulletin.

Four Tips for Winter Safety

It's no surprise that winter months bring increased potential for fire risks and electrical safety hazards. During the coldest months, consumers use additional electrical devices and appliances, such as space heaters, electric blankets and portable generators.

The National Fire Protection Association estimates that 47,700 home fires occur each year in the U.S. due to electrical failure or malfunction. These fires result in an average of 418 deaths, 1,570 injuries and \$1.4 billion in property damage annually.

Safeguard your loved ones and your home with these electrical safety tips from the Electrical Safety Foundation International.

1. Don't overload outlets.

Overloaded outlets are a major cause of residential fires. Avoid using extension cords or multi-outlet converters. Appliances should be plugged directly into a wall outlet.

In general, if you're relying heavily on extension cords, you may need additional outlets to address your needs. Contact a qualified electrician to inspect your home and add new outlets.

Help is Available

To ease the financial burden caused by energy costs on Benton REA's low-income, senior or disabled residential members, Benton REA offers a discount of \$24 each month to qualifying members.



2. Never leave space heaters unattended.

If you're using a space heater, turn it off before leaving the room. Make sure heaters are placed at least 3 feet away from flammable items.

Please note, space heaters take a toll on your energy bill. If you're using them throughout your home, it may be time to upgrade your home heating system.

3. Inspect heating pads and electric blankets.

These items cause nearly 500 fires every year. Electric blankets that are more than 10 years old create additional risks for a fire hazard.

Inspect your electric blankets and heating pads. Look for dark, charred or frayed spots, and make sure the electrical cord is not damaged.

Do not place any items on top of a heating pad or electric blanket. Never fold them when in use.

4. Use portable generators safely.

Unfortunately, winter storms can cause prolonged power outages, which means many consumers will use portable

generators to power their homes.

Never connect a standby generator into your home's electrical system.

For portable generators, plug appliances directly into the outlet provided on the generator. Start the generator first, before you plug in appliances. Run it in a well-ventilated area outside your home. The carbon monoxide it generates is deadly, so keep it away from your garage, doors, windows and vents. ■

Abby Berry writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives. Electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56% of the nation's landscape.

IS YOUR POWER OUT?

If your electricity is out for more than a few minutes:

- Check your breaker box to see if a circuit breaker has tripped.
- Check to see if your neighbors have power.
- Report Benton REA outages by calling 800-221-6987 or use the SmartHub app.

COOPERATIVE INFORMATION

BENTON RURAL ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION

Prosser Office
402 7th St. | P.O. Box 1150
Prosser, WA 99350
509-786-2913

Office Hours: Mon. - Fri., 7 a.m. - 5 p.m.

West Richland Office
6095 West Van Giesen St.
West Richland, WA 99353
509-967-2921

Office Hours: Mon. - Fri., 8 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Toll Free: 800-221-6987
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MEMBER SERVICES

This newsletter is produced by the Benton REA Member Services and Economic Development Department.

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Qualifications:

► Combined annual household income that is equal to or less than 150% of the Washington state poverty guideline for two-member households.

► Applicants must be 62 years of age or older. The age criteria for qualification under the program can be waived if the applicant provides proof of disability through a current "Social Security Administration Retirement, Survivors and Disability Insurance Statement" for the applicable period.

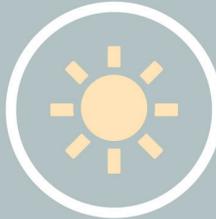
Download the discount application at BentonREA.org or call 509-786-2913.

Community energy assistance programs are also available in both Benton and Yakima counties. Visit the Energy Assistance page of our website for a list of agencies we recommend for additional energy assistance. ■

Space Heater Safety Tips

Space heaters are a great way to warm specific rooms in your home without having to crank up the thermostat, but using space heaters doesn't come without risk! Use the tips below to keep your home safe.

DO: Plug your space heater directly into the wall outlet.

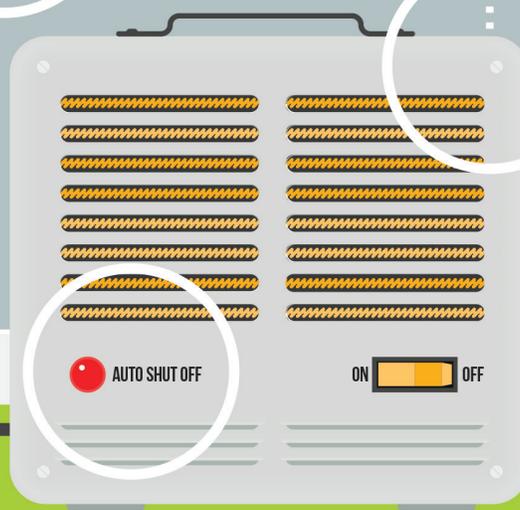


DO: Keep your space heater in low-moisture rooms.

DO: Keep your space heater at a safe distance (at least 3 feet) from kids, pets and flammable items.



DO: Buy a unit with an automatic shutoff in case the unit tips over, or you forget to shut it off.



DO: Always follow the directions and take a broken space heater to a qualified appliance service center.



DON'T: Leave your space heater unattended. Always unplug it before you leave the house or go to bed.



DON'T: Use an extension cord to plug in your space heater. It can cause the heater to over-heat, and can be a tripping hazard.

DON'T: Place your space heater near curtains, clothing, furniture or bedding.



DON'T: Try to repair a broken space heater yourself.



DON'T: Put your space heater in your bathroom. The moisture can damage the unit, which could cause it to malfunction.



One Year of Community Solar

Benton REA's community solar project went live January 2, 2019. In one year, Co-op Solar produced 41,000 kilowatt hours of electricity—enough to power two efficient, modern, all-electric, 2,000-square-foot homes for one year.

Thirty-one Benton REA members invested in the project and are reaping the benefits of renewable, carbon-free energy produced in West Richland.

"We thought it was an exciting project for the environment," says Paul Dowdy.

He and his wife, Jan, have been members for more than 40 years and invested in one Co-op Solar unit.

"We weren't sure about installing solar panels on our house or a wind turbine, but we could be still be involved with Co-op Solar," Paul says.

In the first two months, the array produced very little solar energy, due to Eastern Washington's typical cloudy winters and the large amount of snow accumulated in February 2019. However, the sun came out in March and remained a steady energy-producer through October. The sunniest month was July, producing 6,280 kWh.

The project was estimated to produce 43,725 kWh annually. It fell short of that goal.

Electricity generated from Co-op Solar is credited to the electric accounts of the 31 Benton REA members who enrolled in the program in August 2018. Co-op members were given the opportunity to buy the energy

produced from the 550 solar units at \$200 per unit. The project sold out in eight days.

In 2019, each solar unit produced about 74 kWh. Participants received \$5.80 in credit on their Benton REA electric bill per unit in which they invested. In addition, they each received from Washington state \$0.16 per kWh for electricity generated by their units. This state incentive is distributed each year in June for a total of eight years. The project is expected to fully pay for itself in fewer than 15 years.

Benton REA member Bruce Hugo is a self-proclaimed skeptic about solar energy. But, he invested in 55 Co-op Solar units.

"I wanted to put my money where my mouth was to see how it would play out," he says.

Bruce keeps track of his payback each month and says he's learned from the experience.

"A combination of the actual value of the power you're producing and the support you get from the government is enough that it will pay for itself in a reasonable amount of time—less than the lifetime of the project," he says. "There were no unpleasant surprises."

Several members invested in the maximum 55 units. Some invested in just one.

"We wanted to give as many people as possible a chance," says Jan. "We started with one unit and said we'd



add more if they were available."

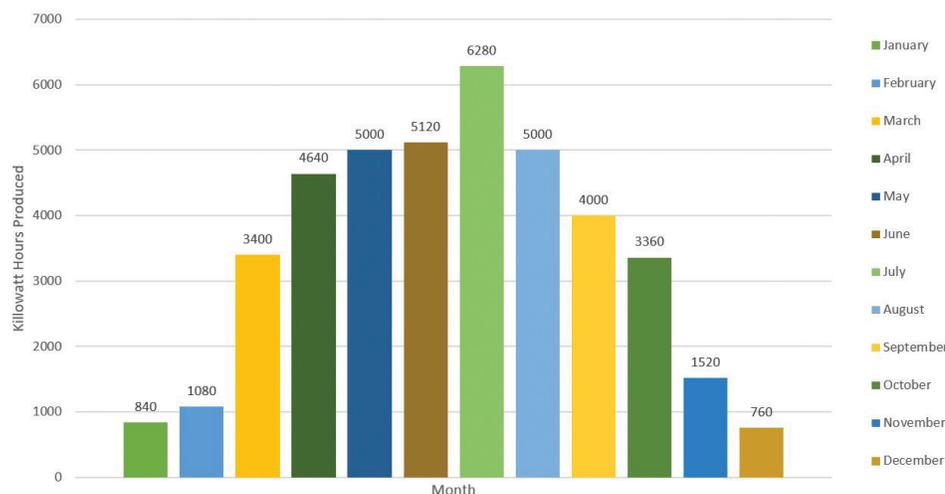
Donnie Petross invested in five units. Although the payback isn't as large as he'd hoped for in the first year, he was happy with the state incentive he received. He said he participated in part to help increase his energy-independence.

"The dams are a majority of our energy," he says. "And that's clean energy, too."

Benton REA has no plans to expand Co-op Solar but is always listening to members' concerns. Members who wish to participate in Benton REA's residential or commercial net metering program should call 509-786-8265.

More Co-op Solar production data and graphs can be found at BentonREA.org/co-op-solar. ■

2019 Co-op Solar Production



An aerial view of Benton REA's community solar array on W. Van Giesen Street in West Richland.