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PG&E drops diversion options from its PVP proposal, Mendocino County officials report



Cape Horn Dam is part of the Potter Valley Project. (Kyle Schwartz/Courtesy of CalTrout)



Mendocino County officials said they will continue working on options for maintaining water diversions between the Eel and Russian rivers that were created more than 100 years ago for the Potter Valley Project, despite the announcement by the Pacific Gas and Electric company last week that it will no longer include plans being formulated by a regional group for modification of the hydroelectric plant's infrastructure in its proposal for decommissioning the facility.

"It's a shock, and we're still kind of reeling from it," 1st District Mendocino County Supervisor Glenn McGourty told the Board of Supervisors during its Feb. 6 meeting, describing the announcement from the utility company as "very much like Lucy (pulling the football out from under) Charlie Brown every time we deal with PG&E."

McGourty said the latest sharp turn from PG&E on its long and winding path of decommissioning the Potter Valley Project (which was once an essential provider of electricity to the Ukiah Valley) came the day after the first meeting of the recently formed Eel-Russian River Project Joint Powers Authority, which JPA board member McGourty described as "the group that would be taking over the diversion from PG&E, and designing a new one that would move Eel River water to continue the flow of Eel River water to our region."

Fellow JPA board member Janet Pauli, chair of the Mendocino County Inland Water and Power Commission, said Wednesday that the group of regional stakeholders (which includes the MCIWPC as well as the Round Valley Indian Tribes and the Sonoma County Water Agency) would not be giving up on their goal of continuing the water diversions in a manner that supports both the Russian River and Eel River watersheds, but instead will "keep going on the path we are on, (just on a parallel track, not the same track as PG&E). Right now, our plan is to continue with our analysis of the two options for continued diversions."

After previously making clear that it did not intend to keep operating the old and mostly superfluous hydroelectric plant tucked away in a remote corner of inland Mendocino County, PG&E announced that its decommissioning plan for the Potter Valley Project included removing both Scott Dam and Cape Horn Dam – facilities that created Lake Pillsbury while diverting a portion of the Eel River to the power plant – as well as the water-diverting tunnel itself, unless a viable alternative was submitted before August of 2023, the Eel-Russian Project group did.

“This is all about achieving a solution that honors the needs of all the ecosystems and communities within the region,” Sonoma County Supervisor and Sonoma Water Director James Gore was quoted as saying in the press release announcing the new JPA’s proposal for modifying the Potter Valley Project’s water diversions, and Bill Whipple, president of the Round Valley Indian Tribes Tribal Council, was quoted as saying: “Our goals are to restore the Eel River watershed from its degraded condition and to restore our salmon fishery to sustainable and harvestable populations.”

“I urge people not to get overly excited,” said Rep. Jared Huffman (D – San Rafael) Wednesday when asked to respond to the decision by PG&E, explaining that “PG&E is trying to get out from under this project as quickly and as cheaply as possible – but it’s not going to be fast, and it’s not going to be cheap.”

When asked specifically how he intends to “keep his promise to voters of creating a Two-Basin Solution which would protect the water supply that people (a current population described by McGourty as 600,000 residents living between Potter Valley and the Marin County line) have depended upon for more than 100 years, while also supporting the “extreme efforts” of groups like the Eel-Russian Project to improve habitat in the Eel River watershed for analogous fish,” Huffman said that the current water diversions will be sustained in a “fish-friendly” manner.

“There will be fish-friendly diversions,” said Huffman, noting that he will remain an advocate for a Two-Basin Solution, and was still “intent on getting it across the finish line,” noting that the proposals for continued diversions did not have to be created in partnership with PG&E in order for them to be successful, and that he was “as confident as I have ever been” about the Two-Basin Solution becoming a reality.

When asked how he intended to support the efforts to modify the current diversions, Huffman pointed to funding he previously secured from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which he described in a press release as a “\$2 million grant to Sonoma County Water Agency meant to study a diversion from the Eel River to the Russian River that will have the least possible impact on salmon and steelhead.”

Huffman noted in the release that he “personally advocated for this grant, which is a part of the Bureau of Reclamation’s WaterSMART program to support the study, design and construction of collaboratively developed ecosystem restoration projects that provide widespread regional benefits and improve the health of fisheries, wildlife and aquatic habitat through restoration and improved fish passage.”

“Now that PG&E has decided to remove (Scott Dam and Cape Horn Dam), these federal funds will set us up to develop the Two-Basin Solution I have been encouraging for years,” Huffman is quoted as saying in the release. “In the face of compounding climate change impacts, dam removal and a modern diversion for water will help protect salmon and steelhead while ensuring a dependable water supply.”

When asked for comment, PG&E officials issued this statement: “PG&E has reviewed the proposal provided by the Project Proponents (but) determined that there are aspects of the proposal which do not align with its goal of completing the decommissioning of the Potter Valley Project within the schedule approved by FERC. Therefore, the proponent’s request to construct the new Eel-Russian facility under FERC’s jurisdiction will not be included in PG&E’s Final Draft Surrender Application and Decommissioning Plan, (but) it is encouraged to see broad stakeholder support of the proposal and supports completion of the new facility in a separate but parallel path to PG&E’s decommissioning. To facilitate that path, PG&E will include those portions of the proposal that will not otherwise delay dam removal (and) will continue to engage with the proponents on a solution which addresses both parties’ goals.”