

POLITICO

Coalition lobbies for reforms to speed hydropower permitting, enhance climate considerations

BY:

CATHERINE MOREHOUSE

| 04/04/2022 11:56 AM EDT

A coalition of Native American tribes, conservation organizations and hydropower industry groups have agreed to push for a package of legislative reforms they say could boost hydropower as a clean energy resource in the United States.

After years of disagreement over the environmental benefits and drawbacks of dams — which provide carbon-free power, but at the cost of clogging rivers and streams vital to regional ecosystems — the group [sent a letter to Congress and the White House on Monday](#) urging amendments to the Federal Power Act that would speed up the permitting process for some dams, while giving Native American tribes more authority, including over projects located within a tribal reservation. It would also call on FERC to consider climate change when developing license conditions for a dam.

Details: The hydropower industry has long touted the climate benefits of carbon-free hydropower, but complained that permitting has become too onerous and expensive. “Hydropower is critical to achieving the goal of a reliable, zero-carbon electricity grid, and this package would strengthen the licensing process, improve environmental outcomes and restore authority to Tribal Nations,” said Malcolm Woolf, CEO and president of the National Hydropower Association, in a statement. “The existing regulatory process is unnecessarily time consuming and expensive.”

River conservation groups and Native American tribes, meanwhile, have criticized the dam building process for its adverse effects on fish populations and the health of river ecosystems, but say the reforms would give the tribes greater autonomy and improve the permitting process to better consider the impact of projects on regional ecosystems. “Healthy rivers are essential to all life. By improving the process for licensing, relicensing and decommissioning dams, and by restoring autonomy and self-determination to Tribal Nations, we will improve outcomes for rivers and

communities nationwide,” said Tom Kiernan, president of American Rivers, in a statement.

The agreement proposes speeding up licensing to two years for some dams that are in place but currently don’t generate electricity, and three years for some pumped storage that is not connected to a natural body of water.

It also recommends directing FERC to conduct additional studies on expanding micro hydropower — facilities that generate up to 100 kilowatts of power, according to DOE — consider mitigation measures that could prevent adverse impacts to regional fish populations and require the agency to consider how climate change might impact a hydroelectric project over time. FERC did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The proposal also pitches shifting authority for projects held on a Native American reservation from the Department of Interior to Native American tribes, and aims to expand the input and authority the tribes have over the permitting process.

“Indian Reservations and Tribal trust resources have unduly borne the burden of hydroelectric power development in this Country, and this package would give Tribes a true seat at the table to ensure that this does not continue to happen,” said Mary Pavel, former staff director of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee and a partner at Sonosky, Chambers, Sachse, Endreson & Perry, in a statement.