

MEETING NOTES
Stevens Creek Hydroelectric Project (FERC No. 2535)

Joint Meeting –
Fish Passage TWC and Recreation TWC

September 20, 2022

ATTENDEES:

Alison Jakupca (Kleinschmidt)	Jeffery Williams (GADNR – EPD)
Amy Bresnahan (DESC)	Jessica Crawford (Archeological Conservancy)
Andy Herndon (NMFS)	John Craun (Stakeholder)
Ashley Swain (Columbia Co. CVB)	Keith Whalen (USFS)
Bilal Harris (Earth and Water Group)	Kevin Mack (NMFS)
Bill Post (SCDNR)	LeeAnne Wendt (Muscogee Creek Nation)
Bjorn Lake (NMFS)	Melanie Olds (USFWS)
Caleb Gaston (DESC)	Oscar Flite (City of Augusta)
Chad Hendrix (City of Augusta)	Paul Vidonic (Dominion Energy)
Cole Watkins (Stakeholder)	Pete Sturke (Dominion Energy)
Derrick Miller (USFS)	Ray Ammarell (DESC)
Elizabeth Miller (SCDNR)	Rusty Wenerick (SCDHEC)
Eric Bauer (USFWS)	Santiago Martinez (GA DCA)
Henry Mealing (Kleinschmidt)	Shelly Blackburn (Columbia Co. CVB)
Iris Griffin (DESC)	Tonya Bonitatibus (SRK)
Jason Bettinger (SCDNR)	Wes Byne (City of Augusta)
Jason Moak (Kleinschmidt)	Will Pruitt (Kleinschmidt)
Jay Payne (GADNR – WRD)	

These notes are a summary of the major points presented during the meeting and are not intended to be a transcript or analysis of the meeting.

INTRODUCTION

Alison J. provided the group with an introduction, overview, and a relicensing schedule/timetable. She explained that this meeting provides the opportunity for stakeholders in attendance to present local-level goals and objectives, with local agencies, stakeholders, participants, to present local solutions prior to significant FERC involvement.

Alison noted that the Exhibit E of the Draft License Application, forthcoming in the 4th quarter of 2022, will include a FERC schedule and Project timeline, that will contain some detail about submittal dates and details of when respective agencies (i.e., USFS, SCDNR, USFWS, NFMS) need to have comments submitted back to Dominion Energy.

The group then opened into the first Resource Conservation Group discussion, the Fish Passage Technical Working Group, followed by Water Quality discussions and the Recreation Technical Working Group.

FISH PASSAGE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

The group first discussed updates regarding fish passage at downstream facilities (NSBLD, Augusta Diversion Dam).

- Fish Passage at the New Savannah Bluff Lock and Dam (NSBLD) is currently undergoing legal proceedings. Mediations have halted without details on next steps. No current timeline for fish passage installation is known at this point in the process.
- There are historic fish passage structures currently in place at the Augusta Diversion Dam (ADD), including an inoperable fish passage structure in the middle of the dam. Augusta is currently consulting with agencies regarding fish passage at ADD.

Two main questions were raised:

1. Is Stevens Creek Dam an impediment to eel passage?
 - a. Eels within the Savannah River are present, and migrating up through NSBLD, passing Augusta Shoals and are found in Stevens Creek Reservoir.
 - b. Stevens Creek Dam does not appear to be a significant barrier for eels, but are current eel numbers meeting resource agency objectives?
2. Should there be an eel-specific passage or wait until a proper fish passage structure for other species (i.e., shads) takes place at NSBLD and Augusta Diversion Dam?
 - a. The group determined that none of the current structures (i.e., NSBLD, Augusta Diversion Dam, or Stevens Creek Dam) are exclusion barriers to eels.
 - b. Suggestions included waiting for fish passage structures to be placed at downstream dams so that proper citing studies can be performed to see the

success of those fish passage implementations, which species are using them and in what numbers, and if further passage upstream of Stevens Creek Dam is justified.

- i. Flows and fish communities may change after implementation of downstream passage.
 - ii. Studies/data after implementation can be used to design a single fish passage structure and placement to accommodate multiple species of interest.
- In the meantime, literature review of existing fisheries assessment data from upstream and downstream may aid in the appropriate timing of passage installation at Stevens Creek relative to passage installations downstream.
 - What we know so far: Eels have been anecdotally noted congregating in the empty Stevens Dam turbine bay and could use leakages for passage over the dam and additionally passing over the face of the spillway. One suggestion was that the group use existing information to characterize the eel fishery in its current state.
 - The group agreed to continue with the Fish Passage Committee to discuss available data, data gaps, when to implement studies, design, and passage.

The group additionally discussed the downstream passage of eels.

- Blade strike analysis are currently being performed with results available to the committee for review in the upcoming months.
- Several studies at other hydropower projects show that eels move downstream primarily at night. The Project is currently operated so that the plant is constantly generating although it is often reduced to allow the pool to fill. Spilling typically only occurs when there are high flows from Thurmond Dam (8,000 – 10,000 cfs). Site specific downstream entrainment studies showed that should eels select the powerhouse for their route of downstream passage, the turbines are expected to have a minimal impact on survival (i.e., low turbine mortality). Dominion noted that the amount of leakage is substantial at Stevens Creek due to its age. Therefore, eels have a variety of passage options from which to move upstream and downstream of the dam.

- Under the existing license, the Habitat Enhancement Fund was developed to off-set entrainment impacts of project operations. The fund is specific to fish entrainment, however, Forest Service suggested that this fund could be used to off-set upstream migration until downstream passage is installed.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provided the Savannah River Restoration Plan that includes passage goals. This plan could be used to support discussions and goal under the fish passage technical committee.

The group discussed several steps moving forward:

- Develop a plan for a post-license fish passage technical committee in the Draft License Application.
- Gather existing data on eels above and below Stevens Creek Dam and incorporate it into the Aquatic Habitat Whitepaper.

ACTION ITEMS

- Develop framework of Fish Passage Technical Committee.
- Agencies (USFWS, NMFS, SCDNR, GDNR) to identify fish passage goals.

WATER QUALITY DISCUSSIONS

The group discussed comments received on the draft Water Quality Study Report. The main focus of the discussion was regarding the Stevens Creek arm of the reservoir, including residence time, DO levels, and mixing.

The group discussed agency recommendations of additional water quality studies focused on Stevens Creek.

- Additional studies could help identify adverse impacts and aid in an understanding of how the water quality in the reservoir is impacted by re-regulation operations and upstream flows.

- Data can be collected next year in months of concern, potentially including a diurnal survey to depict what happens during flood flows.
- Data could be collected and submitted as a supplement after FLA is filed.
- A question arose as to whether this information will be needed for the Georgia EPD 401 Water Quality Certification (WQC). The 401 WQC needs to be applied for with 60 days of filing FLA with FERC.

Additional WQ Discussion:

The group hypothesized that organic rich waters within Stevens Creek are backed up, flooding the silty and organic-rich flats that are hypoxic, then draws that water out into the river during Stevens Creek generation. Pulses from Thurmond act like a tidal system that reverses flow in Stevens Creek, which is exacerbated by low-flow conditions. Study report comments are currently being considered, but a Water Quality group meeting could be held to further discuss water quality concerns within the project boundary.

ACTION ITEMS

- Assemble straw man of proposed 2023 study and schedule a Water Quality Group Meeting.

RECREATION

The purpose of the recreation discussion was to review current recreation opportunities, additional opportunities, and the feasibility of recreation enhancements (location, property ownership, safety).

Alison briefly presented the recreation study results and presented a spreadsheet that outlines Recreation Enhancement recommendations received thus far during the relicensing by stakeholders, including advantages, disadvantages, and notes. This spreadsheet has been included as the table below. Additionally, Columbia County provided DESC with the Improvement Plan developed for Betty's Branch Access Area. The plan includes an ADA

kayak launching facility (constructed subsequent to the September meeting), parking and turn-around improvements, and courtesy dock. DESC partnership on planned facilities may be considered as enhancement measures for the new license term.

ACTION ITEMS

- Jay P. (GADNR) to check on GA boat ramp at Thurmond Dam (i.e., ownership, maintenance, potential for improvements).
- DESC investigate potential partnerships between DESC and private entities, stakeholders, others about land acquisition to provide new boat ramp on GA side.
- DESC to continue communications with Columbia County regarding Betty's Branch ramp and parking area.
- Wildlife Enhancement Opportunities: DESC/USFS/KA to discuss wildlife opportunities. Most USFS lands in SC are all under WMA and under SCDNR management, but there may be additional opportunities within Project boundary.
- Identify areas of targeted bank fishing. Contact GDNR and SCDNR to further discuss potential and if/what fish attractors can be used.

Recreation PMEs	Advantages	Drawbacks	Notes
Construct kayak launch at Betty's Branch	Takes advantage of existing GA access where DESC-owned properties is limited.	Land-acquisition of adjacent properties would be difficult.	High volume of recreation traffic is causing conflict/safety issues with boaters vs paddlers using the same ramps. Columbia County is making plans (Columbia County Recreation Development Plan) for an ADA compliant ramp and launch for canoes. Preliminary plans were shown on screen.
Extending boat ramp at Betty's Branch	Allows boat launching at lower water levels. In the current state, trailers tires/axles drop off the end of the ramp in lower water levels.		Could this be added to the Columbia County Recreation Development Plan?
Vegetation and/or sediment management at Betty's Branch	Allows easier paddler/boat navigation at ramp and out into the river.	Temporary.	Vegetation and sedimentation is limiting paddling activities/access at certain water elevations. Currently being addressed by Columbia County.
Add parking at Betty's Branch for vehicles without trailers / prevent non-trailer vehicles from parking in designated trailer spaces.	Reduce confusion and maximize parking.		Parking lot or stripes should be modified to maximize parking spaces and install signage to direct people with/without trailers to the proper parking spaces. Try to reduce boat trailers at ball fields.

Recreation PMEs	Advantages	Drawbacks	Notes
Install lighting (OVERALL IMPROVEMENTS) at Fury's Ferry	Lighting will increase sense of safety. Great location for potential bank fishing, wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing access.	<p>Increased lighting and sense of safety also encourages more after-hours usage.</p> <p>Theft is a major issue.</p> <p>Poles needs to be metal (not wood). Lighting needs to be solar, need to be secure/theft proof.</p>	Focus should be on Fury's Ferry, (no increases to traffic at Chota). Concerns that many items like benches, tables, lighting, fencing, bathrooms, might not work because of thieves and vandalism. USFS open to discussions about improvements such as canoe slides, bank fishing opportunities.
Construct tailrace fishing pier on GA side of dam below Stevens Creek Dam	Increased GA fishing access.	<p>Property/project boundary concerns - still DESC property, but outside of SC project boundary (within Augusta DD project boundary).</p> <p>Would require access through DESC security gates, adjacent to SoCo property/facilities, limited parking.</p> <p>Access would need to be restricted to pier usage only (no launching allowed) to avoid</p>	Savannah Rapids is very well advertised, very easily accessible, and used by many. Justification for another fishing pier ~1 mile upstream is lacking. Cultural resource concerns with Stalling Island - needing avoid increasing curiosity, looting, and vandalism.

Recreation PMEs	Advantages	Drawbacks	Notes
		additional traffic at Stallings Island.	
Improve boat ramp at Stevens Creek site (extend, widen, etc.)	Takes advantage of DESC-owner properties. Recommendations through RUNS.	Widening cannot occur at the expense of parking, fishing, or pier usage.	
Improve/re-line parking lot at Stevens Creek site, expand parking	Improve parking arrangement to maximize spaces and reduce confusion or double parking.	Property will need to be examined, but space is relatively limited to see if parking can be expanded.	Perceptions of crowdedness during recreation studies could have been influenced by people parking incorrectly.
Provide bank fishing/pier fishing at Stevens Creek site	Increased fishing opportunities.	Flash flooding and woody debris drift could be a maintenance or safety issue. Would these need to be ADA compliant, wheelchair stops, paved paths, etc.?	Consistent with community input on need for increased bank fishing. Allow more standing room along water's edge near boat ramps and launches - this would allow less conflict at ramp itself.
Construct canoe portage on SC side of dam	Increased connectivity for paddlers.	Any increase in boat/paddler traffic is an increased risk to Stallings Island and a major concern the Muscogee Nation. Safety concerns, which violates DESC adherence to safety precautions, and will not promote the usage of portage area so steep and rocky.	An increase in traffic could include increased curiosity, looting, vandalism. Cultural/historical/tribal issues are almost always the deciding factor regarding recreation issues in the FERC process. Muskogee Nation in discussion about how to increase security when dealing with future/long-term/projected increase in the paddling traffic.

Recreation PME	Advantages	Drawbacks	Notes
		Property concerns.	
Construct canoe portage on GA side of dam	Increased connectivity for paddlers.	<p>Any increase in boat/paddler traffic is an increased risk to Stallings Island and a major concern of the Muscogee Nation.</p> <p>Concerns around DESC/SoCo facilities (length of portage and safety/security concern).</p>	<p>An increase in traffic could include increased curiosity, looting, vandalism. Cultural/historical/tribal issues are almost always the deciding factor regarding recreation issues in the FERC process. Muskogee Nation in discussion about how to increase security when dealing with future/long-term/projected increase in the paddling traffic.</p>
Implement canoe shuttle around dam	Increased connectivity for paddlers.	<p>Costly. Observed paddler traffic does not justify such a need. Plenty of paddling opportunities downstream.</p>	<p>Was mentioned that a handful of times, DESC has given paddlers rides around dam, but never enough to consider.</p>
Open locks to allow boating through the dam	Connectivity for paddlers, fishes.	<p>Safety and security concerns.</p> <p>To function as needed, rock ramp would need to extend all the way to Stallings Island, which is a concern already discussed earlier.</p>	<p>Originally explored as a ramp structure to allows fish passage and slide kayaks downstream.</p>

Recreation PMEs	Advantages	Drawbacks	Notes
New recreation access area on GA side of reservoir	Increased GA access.	Lack of DESC-owned properties to use as new launch.	USACE ramp on SC side, with GDNR ramp on GA side that needs improvements/maintenance. Solution may require multiple players (private, stakeholders, DESC partnerships).
Fish structure installation to benefit bank fishing.	Potential increase in fishing success from bank.	Difficulties keeping structures in place during high flows. Potential obstructions at boat/canoe launches.	Team should explore exactly where these structures should be placed and communicate with GDNR, SCDNR, and others to see if such placement is feasible.
Wildlife enhancements, viewing opportunities.	Increase wildlife viewing opportunities, enhance wildlife habitats.	Potential land acquisition issues.	Explore areas to increase wildlife viewing (i.e., observation platforms), waterfowl management areas, nesting boxes, dove perches, etc.