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NEWS REPORT

EBID Testifies Before Congress on Small Hydropower Opportunities

The House Water and Power Subcommittee heard testimony on the potential of small-scale hydroelectric power opportunities from administration representatives, municipal and irrigation water interests, and the environmental community yesterday. “Small hydropower is not the sole answer to generating enough renewable energy to meet our future needs, but it should be an important part of the solution,” said Subcommittee Chairwoman Grace Napolitano (D-CA) in her opening remarks.

The two-hour hearing included ten witnesses across two panels with diverse interests in small hydropower opportunities. Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) Treasurer-Manager Gary Esslinger testified to the potential benefits of low-head hydropower installation on existing irrigation canal structures. EBID developed its own low-cost turbine design with assistance from a state grant and has since partnered with Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories to refine the design and inventory canal drops throughout the district with hydropower potential. “I believe many irrigation districts throughout the Western United States maintain similar in-house capabilities to develop hydropower turbines at low cost,” Esslinger said.

Despite EBID’s turbine development, the district must still apply for an exemption to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s (FERC) hydropower licensing process. Esslinger and others described this process as time consuming and unnecessary given the lack of potential for environmental concern involving hydropower facilities using existing canal structures that are already off-river. “With an easy-to-navigate regulatory environment, our efforts could be replicated on a wider scale and free-up district revenues to invest in the aging infrastructure backlog and new resources,” Esslinger said.

In response to Esslinger’s testimony, Chairwoman Napolitano said, “That is American ingenuity at its best” and noted EBID’s turbine cost of \$3,500 was just seven percent the price of similar, commercially available turbines.

Congressman Adrian Smith (R-NE) signaled his intent to offer legislation exempting small hydropower projects on existing engineering structures from the current FERC conduit exemption requirements during the hearing. “Small hydropower is simply not feasible with the current process,” he said.

Speaking in support of Congressman Smith’s proposed legislation, Ranking Member Tom McClintock (R-CA) said, “By simply moving government out of the way, we can end up with lower costs and additional small hydropower development.”

Administration representatives indicated progress in their goal to identify additional opportunities for hydropower and plan to release a report in October listing federal sites with generation potential. “Reclamation is playing a strong role in identifying and assisting in sustainable hydropower expansion in the U.S., taking into account appropriate environmental considerations,” Bureau of Reclamation Commissioner Michael Connor said.

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