United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Interior Regions 8, 9, 10, and 12
555 Battery Street, Suite 122
San Francisco, CA 94111

IN REPLY REFER TO:
1.D. (PWR-PRR)

The Honorable Kimberly D. Bose
Secretary Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
888 First Street, N.E. Room 1A
Washington, D.C. 20426

Dear Secretary Bose:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the Proposed Study Plan (PSP) for the Kern River No. 1 Hydroelectric Project (P-1930) filed by Southern California Edison Company (SCE) on October 17, 2023. The National Park Service (NPS) provides comments on the PSP through its authority under the Federal Power Act (18 CFR 4.38(a), 5.41(f)(4)-(6), and 16.8(a)); the Outdoor Recreation Act (Pub Law 88-29), and the NPS Organic Act (39 Stat. 535). In this role, the NPS consults with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and applicants concerning a project's effects on outdoor recreation resources.

It is the policy of the NPS to represent the national interest regarding recreation and to assure that hydroelectric projects subject to relicensing incorporate the full potential for meeting present and future public outdoor recreation demands while maintaining and enhancing a quality environmental setting for those projects. Investigating opportunities to improve the recreation experience is consistent with NPS policy and FERC guidelines to identify potential future recreation needs.

The NPS submits the following comments on the PSP for the Kern River No. 1 Hydropower Project, which will be further referred to as the "Project." The NPS filed comments[1] on the recreation studies proposed in the Pre-application Document (PAD)[2] and revised Draft Technical Study Reports[3]. These comments included recommendations on how to improve the studies initially proposed, which SCE took into consideration when preparing the PSP. Our current comments build upon our previous recommendations to further improve the recreation studies to make them comprehensive enough to ensure FERC has adequate information to analyze environmental effects on recreation use and demand and inform license conditions.

[1] Document Accession #: 20230831-5097 Filed Date: 08/31/2023
[2] Accession Number: 20230505-5209; Filed Date: 5/5/2023
[3] Accession Number: 20230823-5039; Filed Date: 8/23/2023

Proposed Study Plan

Table 2. Stakeholder Study Requests and Associated SCE Responses

The Draft REC 2 Technical Study Report[4] proposed to collect trail use data on Project trails using two data collection methods: self-survey forms using QR codes and trail cameras. The NPS recommended that study include an option for trail users to complete paper self-survey forms and submit them in drop boxes. In response (Response NPS-4), the Applicant stated that they revised the study to use the paper self-survey forms and drop boxes *in place of* the QR codes and trail cameras. The NPS intended that all three options (drop boxes with paper forms, QR codes, and trail cameras) should be used to collect a more comprehensive set of data. The trail cameras would collect quantitative data (i.e., number of trail users) and user type (e.g., hikers, mountain bikers, equestrian, etc.) and the surveys would gather data on demographics and qualitative information (e.g., recreation user preferences, perceived future needs, etc.).

The Applicant should consult with the Sequoia National Forest on the use of trail cameras on lands that they administer. While there was recent concern over the use of trail cameras in developed recreation sites (i.e., campgrounds) on Sequoia National Forest lands along the North Fork Kern River used for the Kern River No. 3 Project (P-2290), such concerns may not apply to trails and undeveloped recreation sites. However, if Sequoia National Forest expresses concerns with trail camera use, an option would be to use infra-red trail counters. These devices are not connected to a camera and only count hikers who pass by them. They are used on USFS lands as part of the National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) program, including on Sequoia National Forest lands. Since trail counters would not collect data on user types, they need be supplemented with calibration counts. These would consist of study technicians staying at each of the trail sites for a selected time during a randomly selected number of days per month over the study period. The technician would record the number and type of trail users observed and direction of travel (i.e., if they are starting their hike/ride or finishing it). The data gathered would be used to characterize the number of users captured by the trail counters.

REC 2 – Recreation Facility Use Assessment Technical Study Plan

Project Nexus

In addition to the USFS day use areas (i.e., developed sites) located adjacent to the Democrat Dam impoundment at the bypass reach, recreation use at undeveloped sites along SR 178 also have a nexus to the Project. This includes sites providing access for river-related recreation (e.g., whitewater boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking, swimming, etc.) and hiking opportunities offered by Project trails that connect with USFS trails and unmarked trails. All such recreation activities have a nexus to Project operations: river flows are influenced by the Project, which affect river-related recreation and Project trails provide access for hikers to connect to USFS trails and provide opportunities for extended hikes.

[4] Accession Number: 20230823-5039; Filed Date: 8/23/2023

Study Approach

Characterize Recreation Use at Developed Recreation Facilities and at Undeveloped Recreation Areas Along the Bypass Reach

The NPS requests that the proposed study of recreation use along the bypass reach be modified to ensure that all user groups are surveyed systematically, and sample sizes are statistically significant.

The PSP states that "opportunistic in-person surveys" would be delivered by the surveyor completing the vehicle counts, which would be conducted during two of three randomly selected four-hour shifts. The PSP does not provide details on the survey delivery methods, such as the duration the surveyor will be at each study site or methods used to contact recreationists. The study approach merely states that "*survey technicians will be instructed to opportunistically intercept recreation users in parking lots or other safe-to-access locations during the vehicle counts.*" The PSP should provide additional information on how the "opportunistic" in-person surveys will be conducted:

- Will the intercept surveys be conducted when the surveyors are driving both directions (upstream and downstream) during each four-hour shift?
- How long will the surveyors stay at each of the developed and undeveloped recreation sites to conduct the intercept surveys?
- Will the surveyor approach recreationists when they are near their vehicles, or will they seek out recreationists to survey?
- How will the opportunistic survey method ensure that an appropriate number of random surveys are collected for the results to be statistically significant?

Developed Recreation Sites

The vehicle counts and in-person intercept surveys are appropriate methods to use at the four developed recreation sites in the study area. These sites have available designated parking, are often filled to capacity, and can provide surveyors a safe area to work. To ensure an adequate number of recreationists are randomly selected to complete the survey (i.e., a statistically significant sample size), the surveying technique should be systematic (i.e., not opportunistic). This would be achieved by setting a specific amount of time surveyors spend at each of the four developed recreation sites and determining a general location where they intercept recreationists (e.g., stay near the parking lot exit and only survey those who have completed their recreation activity). In addition to conducting vehicle counts and in-person intercept surveys, also conduct spot counts and record the number of recreationists and types of recreation activities.

Undeveloped Recreation Sites

Vehicle counts and in-person intercept surveys would not likely gather sufficient data on recreation users (e.g., whitewater boaters and day users) at undeveloped sites along the bypass reach. This is due to the following reasons:

- There are insufficient parking areas and/or unsafe conditions for the surveyor to pull over to conduct the surveys.

- Recreationists would not likely be near their vehicles when the surveyor is conducting spot counts, but would be dispersed away from their vehicles. This is especially true for whitewater boaters who quickly depart from their vehicles to carry their equipment to the river, and then put-in on the river. It is thus likely that whitewater boaters would be adequately represented.

The vehicle counts alone would not provide data on types of users (kayakers, anglers, picnickers, swimmers, etc.) or provide any demographic or qualitative data. The NPS recommends the following study modifications to collect recreation use and experience data at the undeveloped recreation sites in the Project bypass reach:

- In addition to in-person intercept surveys, use self-administered surveys in tamper-proof boxes. Determine locations for these boxes in consultation with Sequoia National Forest and American Whitewater.
- Consult with Sequoia National Forest regarding the feasibility of using trail cameras at the undeveloped recreation sites. If determined feasible, set up trail cameras at main access points.
- If trail cameras are determined unfeasible, set up infrared trail counters at the undeveloped recreation access points. Supplement trail counters with calibration/spot counts.
- Randomly choose time and days for intercept surveys and spot/calibration counts that cover weekdays, weekends, and holidays.

Study Duration

The NPS recommends data collection efforts be conducted year long, with the exception of the two day-use areas that are closed November - March. Although recreation occurs along the bypass reach all year, the PSP proposes to conduct the vehicle counts and in-person intercept surveys from April-September 2024. Two of the developed recreation sites (Democrat Raft Take-out Boating Site and Upper Richbar Day Use Area) are open year-long and should be surveyed year-long. The other two developed recreation sites (Lower Richbar Day Use Area and Live Oak Day Use Area) are open April – October and should be surveyed during this open period.[5]

Recreation use data should occur year-long at the undeveloped recreation sites. Although the Project's PAD identifies that total recreation use declines considerably during the "low-use season," some activities such as fishing increase:

> *Fishing along the lower Kern is open all year; however, fishing does not typically begin until October when water temperatures cool. Fishing continues to be good until April, prior to increased flows from runoff. (p. 3.11-7)*

The proposed study period of April – September would exclude the main fishing season. The PAD describes fishing as a the "*primary recreation activity for visitors*," with the majority of visitors identifying fishing as their recreation activity in the bypass reach. The PAD further states that "*angling access is scattered throughout the bypass reach where highway turnouts are available*." Extending the study period year-long would ensure that the best fishing periods (October – April) would be included

[5] Any vehicles parked at the entrance of the day use areas when the gates are closed should be included in the vehicle counts and possibly the intercept surveys.

and this primary recreation activity would be adequately represented in the study, along with other recreation activity that occurs during the "low-use season."

Characterize Recreation Use at Selected Project Trails

The NPS recommends that the proposed trail study provide recreationists the option to fill out self-survey forms using QR codes and setting up trail cameras in addition to the paper self-survey forms and drop boxes. Providing an option for trail users to respond to the surveys on their mobile device would likely increase the total number of surveys completed. The surveys, either completed and inserted in the drop box or filled out online, would gather data on demographics and qualitative information (e.g., recreation user preferences, perceived future needs). The survey instrument should also include questions aimed at gathering data on perceived future trail needs and demands within the Project area and surrounding communities. The trail cameras are necessary to collect quantitative data (i.e., number of trail users) and user type (e.g., hikers, mountain bikers, equestrian, etc.). First consult with the Sequoia National Forest on the feasibility of using trail cameras to document number and type of trail users. If Sequoia National Forest requests that trail cameras not be used, use infra-red trail counters to record total trail use. Since trail counters would not collect data on user types, supplement them with calibration counts. This involves study technicians staying at each trail site for a selected time during a randomly selected number of days per month over the study period and recording the number and type of trail users observed and direction of travel (i.e., if they are starting their hike/ride or finishing it). The data gathered would be used to characterize the number of users captured by the trail counters.

Estimate Future Recreation Use and Demand

The NPS recommends that the study examine demand for and future potential use of developed recreation trails in the Project area. There currently is a community-led effort to make hiking the Kern River Canyon more accessible by developing the Kern Gateway Trail on the south side of the canyon. This proposed trail system would incorporate the use of some Project trails, connecting them to USFS trails and creating a 15-mile trail from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon to Democrat Dam. The proposed Kern Gateway Trail would meet what the community-led group has identified as existing demand for developed trails in the Bakersfield area. The NPS Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) program is assisting the community group with the trail concept.

The study approach described in the PSP should be modified to gather data on the need and demand for improved trails in the Project area, especially since Project trails have the potential to help meet this demand. To do so, conduct focus group discussions with Kern Gateway Trail members, local hiking groups, and other interested stakeholders to gather existing knowledge on trail demand. Also use input from the focus group to determine means to gather data on "potential trail users" (i.e., those who would hike on existing Project and connecting trails if they knew about the trails or if modifications were made to enhance access). With input from these focus groups, develop a survey to be sent to local hiking groups and other existing or potential trail users that examines the need and demand for developed trails in the Project area. In order to further understand potential use, the survey should ask trail users who have not hiked on the trails within the Project area to provide reasons why they have not done so.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Study Plan for the Kern River No. 1 Hydroelectric Project. For questions, please contact Barbara Rice (barbara_rice@nps.gov) or Lilian Jonas (lilian_jonas@contractor.nps.gov).

Sincerely,

ANNA TAMURA

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Date: 2024.01.08 10:29:31 -08'00'

Anna Tamura
Acting Program Manager, Park Planning & Environmental Compliance
National Park Service, Interior Regions 8, 9, 10 & 12