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Comments on the Draft Fish and Wildlife Program's preferred alternative

The electrical producers and Municipality of Anchorage signed a contract in 1991 wherein they agreed to restore fish populations and other ecosystem functions and values lost when two dams were built on the Eklutna River in 1928.

The draft program contains some good field research but it missed at least one major issue. Eklutna Lake is a glacial lake with very cold water. In a lake, the warmest water tends to rise to the surface and the coldest tends to sink to the bottom. In a natural system, it is the warmest water that flows out of the lake and into the river. But if the preferred alternative is chosen, the AWWU pipeline will be the source of the river's water. The intake structure is on the lake's bottom. The colder water flowing into the river from the AWWU pipe will limit production of some aquatic invertebrate populations (fish food), retard fish growth rates, and affect survival of eggs and fry by freezing sooner than water that would have flowed out of the lake naturally. The final fish and wildlife program should consider the potential impacts of using the "wrong" water to provide optimal downstream fish habitat.

Conversely, removing the colder water from the lake would delay when the lake freezes (it typically freezes in mid-December but has frozen over as late as early January). It might also affect ice thickness. These could have local environmental impacts but are more likely to be relevant to winter recreational activities.

Much more concerning is the program's own finding that the preferred alternative will restore only about one-third of the watershed's potential fish habitat, and the amount of water released through the AWWU pipeline will represent only 4% of the river's historical summertime flow. A fast and simple multiplication of these two figures suggests that the preferred alternative only intends to restore about 1% of the watershed's historic fish-related functions and values. This clearly does not satisfy the requirements of the 1991 agreement.

Notably, none of the municipal, state, and federal agencies that participated in the field research and planning effort support the preferred alternative, except Alaska State Parks, which is certainly no expert on fish and wildlife habitat and productivity. The Native Village of Eklutna, the entity most affected by the loss of most of the river's salmon, does not support the preferred alternative. Instead they have proposed a "community alternative," one that wasn't considered in the draft plan.

I support the "community alternative," which will remove the dam in the near future, when the small amount of electricity that the hydroelectric facility's turbines produce is replaced by other alternative energy sources.