News Release

Drought Threatens Puget Sound Energy's Effort to Protect Skagit River Salmon

BELLEVUE, Wash.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Feb. 22, 2001--Without major precipitation in the next few days, one of the worst wintertime droughts on record essentially will drain Puget Sound Energy's two northwest Washington reservoirs as early as this weekend. If that occurs, the utility, a subsidiary of Puget Energy (NYSE:PSD), will be unable to continue supplementing the Skagit River's flows to prevent the drought's impacts on salmon.

"The situation is going from bad to worse," said Ed Schild, PSE's director of energy production and storage. "Since early in the fall when this drought began to emerge, we've worked with federal, state, and tribal resource agencies to do everything possible to offset the effects of this dry spell. Despite all our best efforts, the well is about to run dry."

At the request of state and federal agencies, Puget Sound Energy voluntarily has been releasing stored reservoir water for nearly three months specifically to help maintain a targeted minimum flow in the Skagit River. That targeted flow of water - about 7,600 cubic feet per second - was collaboratively set by biologists with the National Marine Fisheries Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington state Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Skagit River Cooperative to protect salmon-egg nests and newly hatching salmon.

"Puget Sound Energy has been working with us and other agencies to protect fish as much as possible under the current challenging circumstances," said Donna Darm, acting regional administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service Northwest Region. "We appreciate the company's support, and will continue our coordination to do what we can for our salmon."

PSE's discharge of water from its Lake Shannon and Baker Lake reservoirs has kept the Skagit River's flows well above the mark they'd otherwise have been under natural conditions. The region's exceptionally low rainfall, however, has not been sufficient to replenish the water released from the reservoirs. Meanwhile, the Skagit's free-flowing tributaries, such as the Sauk River, this week are running more than 70 percent below their average February flows. The Skagit itself, supplemented by reservoir water from PSE and Seattle City Light, is flowing at only about half its normal level.

Without a sudden and significant amount of new precipitation, PSE's two Baker basin reservoirs will, within the next few days, drop to their lowest levels in history, Schild said. "All we'll have left is water that cannot be accessed. There will be no water left to augment the Skagit's flows."

At that point, unless the Skagit receives additional water either from Seattle City Light's Skagit River Project reservoirs or from precipitation, the river's flows will fall to about 4,500 cubic feet per second (cfs). At that flow rate, a substantial amount of riverbed likely will be exposed, posing a potential threat to newly hatched salmon.

Normal Skagit River flows for this time of year are around 14,000 cfs. Barring new precipitation, the Skagit River this month could reach one of the two or three lowest February flow levels in the 75 years that hydrological records have been kept.

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