

Environment
The Seattle Times

Feds order owner of dam on Puyallup River to clean up spill from artificial turf

Sep. 3, 2020 at 1:17 pm | Updated Sep. 3, 2020 at 5:15 pm

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Old artificial turf was used in a construction project at the Electron Dam on the Puyallup River, here with its source, Mount Rainier, visible in the background. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

Federal regulators have ordered the owners of Electron Dam on the Puyallup River to clean up its mess following a [spill of rubber debris](#) during unpermitted use of artificial turf in a construction project.

The company must remove all remaining artificial turf from its site, clean up turf debris downriver, fix an inoperable fish ladder at the dam and shut down its construction project at the dam until next summer, according to a letter sent to dam owner Thom Fischer of Electron Hyrdo LLC Wednesday.

In response, [Electron Hydro](#) is asking the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for an extension to continue its work on the dam. That is the safest way, the company

argues, to secure the site for the winter when the river's flows the highest from Mount Rainier.

The dam, long known as a killer of federally protected chinook salmon, burst into public controversy last week. The company used artificial turf as an underlayment for a liner during the ongoing construction project.

The material is potentially toxic and was not permitted for use in the project, according to an Aug. 7 stop-work order issued by the Corps of Engineers. The spill was brought to light after an employee posted video of the turf being placed in the river on social media, and called out the risk of pollution.

The very night after it was laid down on July 29, the river tore pieces of the turf to bits, sending an estimated 4 to 6 cubic yards of tiny black rubber crumbs, hunks of green plastic turf and other debris into the river all the way to Puget Sound's Commencement Bay, according to a consultant's report on the spill.

Now the company is on notice from the Corps to minimize further impacts on protected fish; prepare the site for high fall and winter flows, and remove the artificial turf at the work site and clean up the pieces downstream, according to a letter sent to Fischer by Alexander L. Bullock, colonel of the Corps and engineer at the Seattle district.

Dam owners will request a 30-day extension today, until Oct. 8, to complete work at the dam, Chris Spens, director of regulatory and environmental affairs for Tollhouse Energy Company, stated in an email to The Seattle Times.

[Tollhouse Energy Company](#), based in Bellingham, owns and operates the dam and other hydroelectric projects around the West.

The company will have the materials, including a new rubber bladder dam arriving from Europe, crews and on-site construction inspectors and monitors in place and ready to work by next week if the Corps gives the OK, Spens wrote in his email.

The Puyallup Tribe wants the Corps to deny the extension.

“Based on what they have shown us I am not comfortable at all with an extension. We stand to make a bad situation much worse,” said Russ Ladley, resource protection manager for the tribe. “Three times as much (artificial turf) material lies beneath the active channel that would be subject to remobilization. So no, I am not comfortable at all.

“They need to get that material out of there, and button it up for the winter.”

The fish ladder also has not been operable for weeks, Ladley said, and must be working before protected fish species start to arrive.

Lisa Anderson, attorney for the tribe, said she was not surprised by the request for an extension. But it is unacceptable to the tribe.

Higher flows are certain after Sept. 15, and “that will rip away that turf and send it all downstream,” she said. “The risks outweigh the benefits.”

She said the Corps’ demands were good news. “There has to be no further environmental damage, and the only way to do that is to require them to get this material out by Sept. 15.”

The dam is like others around the region that have outlived their useful lives and should be removed, said Tom O’Keefe, Pacific Northwest stewardship director for American Whitewater, a nonprofit that, along with American Rivers, in 2016 sued the dam’s owners in U.S. District Court in Seattle for fish kills at the Electron project. The suit is pending while the company promises to make fixes.

The dam project is 116 years old and provides electricity for about 20,000 customers. In 2014, Puget Sound Energy sold it to the new owners, who have promised but not yet delivered improvements, O’Keefe said.

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