

EPA: Plant Puts River Life At Risk
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PSNH called on to pay millions for mitigation
By Tricia L. Nadolny, Monitor staff

Public Service of New Hampshire's Bow power plant may have to install an expansive, multimillion-dollar cooling system if a draft permit released yesterday by the Environmental Protection Agency is approved. But PSNH officials at the coal-burning plant dispute the findings and say the release comes after a 14-year period of little to no contact from the EPA.

The new permit, part of a more than 550-page report, will be open for public comment for the next 60 days, at which point it will either be amended or approved. EPA officials said yesterday in a release the new system would replace one that is decades old and that they believe is doing substantial harm to the Merrimack River's aquatic life by heating the habitat around the plant and trapping fish in the system. The new design, which would cost PSNH about \$9 million per year, would draw in 95 percent less water and empty it at lower temperatures, according to the release.

"We know that the fish populations have changed dramatically," EPA spokesman David Deegan said. "There are different fish and some of the native fish, the numbers have declined dramatically. And a lot of the changes we see are fish that want warmer water."

Martin Murray of PSNH said the company hasn't seen the same habitat changes in the data and findings it submits to the EPA. He said the permit the agency released yesterday is in response to a request PSNH submitted in 1997, when its permit was up for renewal. In the 14 years since, PSNH has continued to remind the agency of its overdue permit in the form of required annual reports, Murray said.

He said PSNH officials, who first heard Wednesday that a new draft permit might be on its way, are frustrated by the lack of collaboration leading up to this report's release.

"Is 14 years a long time to wait for the feds to issue a draft permit? It certainly is," Murray said. "Especially when one is really not receiving much in the way of communications in terms of, 'How's it going?' I'm not exaggerating when I'm saying that we received very little in reaction and communication to the material that we were frequently providing to the EPA."

Martin also noted that Congress is discussing changes to the law which informs EPA regulations. He said agency officials would be wise to wait and see the outcome of those conversations before requiring any sweeping changes. Deegan said yesterday he was not familiar enough with the EPA's permitting process to comment on why PSNH's 1997 request was not responded to

until yesterday, or if that timeline is customary. He said he was not aware of what communications the two parties had during that time period.

According to the EPA release, the cooling system would cost PSNH about \$112 million to install and operate over a 20-year-period, a price tag that would raise residents' rates by a little more than a dollar a month.

The EPA plans to host a public meeting and hearing regarding the permit on Nov. 3, and Deegan said the agency is open to revisions based on feedback.

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