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Alaska energy agency gives Susitna dam another look

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FAIRBANKS — Energy specialists have put a flashlight to 25-year-old plans for building a massive dam between Fairbanks and Anchorage.

The Alaska Energy Authority is updating the Susitna Dam cost estimates, using \$1.5 million from the Alaska Legislature, project manager Bryan Carey said Monday night in Fairbanks. It's using another \$1 million from the state to figure out how well the project, if ever built, would fit with existing power transmission lines in Alaska, he said.

Carey said his agency is simply updating a much larger body of research conducted by the state decades ago.

He said it will show the results this summer to the Legislature, which ordered the work during its most recent session. Lawmakers could then consider options, including whether to pursue a federal permit for a dam project.

The Legislature recently has focused on other major energy prospects, most notably a proposed natural gas pipeline.

But for a stretch of time in the 1970s and 1980s, it spent well more than \$100 million on documents needed to build a dam system on the Susitna River, using an estimate from Carey, who spoke at a public lecture at the Noel Wien Library.

The state in 1983 applied for a federal license for the project — then estimated to cost about \$10 billion in today's dollars after adjustments for inflation. But the Legislature shelved the proposal in 1985 after a major slide in international oil prices stymied cost models used to plan the dam and left the Legislature questioning how to help finance it.

“That had a lot to do with Susitna dying,” Carey said of plummeting oil prices.

The proposed Susitna hydropower project could be the biggest ever mentioned for Alaska, outside of one considered briefly by the U.S. Corps of Engineers for the Yukon River at Rampart. Numerous

smaller hydropower projects exist across the state, including the Bradley Lake project in Homer.

Some communities have tinkered with small-scale, experimental approaches to hydropower. But Dennis Witmer, a research assistant professor at the University of Alaska, said such small-scale hydropower technology has yet to prove itself reliable on the open market.

“We need a couple of demonstrations, I think, to get some information on costs and reliability,” said Witmer, who also spoke Monday of some smaller “hydrokinetic” projects. “And I think we need to better understand the environmental impacts.”

At last look, the Susitna hydropower project would supply as much power in a year as the state uses as a whole, Carey said.

As originally envisioned, the project would have consisted of numerous dams along the river. Carey said his agency is updating cost estimates for four alternatives, including a focus on a one- or two-dam system including part or all of a tall, rock-fill “Watana” dam near the Tsusena Creek in the Matanuska Valley and, if needed, a second “Devil Canyon” dam downstream from Watana.

Carey said plans from the 1980s estimated the Watana dam alone could require a 3,000-plus-worker camp and take a decade to build.

Monday’s presentation was part of an ongoing monthly series of lectures organized by the Alaska Center for Energy and Power.

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