

## **Farmers Look for Easy Ways to Create Clean Renewable Energy**

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The U.S. Interior and Energy departments and the Army Corps of Engineers have agreed to create a new strategy for promoting hydropower development while reducing environmental impacts and streamlining regulations. Western irrigators are lining up with creative new projects to take advantage of this development.

For example, New Mexico farmers are fabricating low-cost, efficient turbines to support low-head energy production, utilizing generators and products that can be purchased “off the shelf.” Elephant Butte Irrigation District has identified potential sites for 100 small hydropower units that could be built along existing control structures in the District’s canals.

Under a new memorandum of understanding (MOU), the Obama administration will evaluate new hydropower technologies and their potential impact on U.S. renewable energy supplies. The MOU directs the agencies to formulate a resource assessment of current federal facilities as well as identify ways to upgrade and modernize those facilities and install hydropower technologies at new sites. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) will also be involved in the process.

My organization was invited by Interior Secretary Salazar’s office to participate in the MOU signing ceremony last March in Washington. Many of the farmers and ranchers we represent are interested in installing low-head hydropower facilities in existing irrigation canal systems. While this would seem to be a no-brainer – the actual construction is not that much more difficult than installing an irrigation turnout and there are no new “environmental impacts” –alas, that is not the case.

Under current regulations, anyone who wants to develop hydropower less than 5 megawatts (which would apply to virtually every single potential location within irrigation canals) can get an exemption from FERC licensing requirements. However, the process required to get that exemption can cost \$100,000 and 18-36 months just to satisfy National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) compliance requirements. The costs and time associated with the environmental compliance issues (noticing, public meetings, etc) can make projects that only cost \$20,000 in materials suddenly become infeasible.

Meanwhile, new solar and wind projects can move full-steam ahead without these ridiculous licensing impediments. We believe the process for installing in-canal low-head hydro facilities (there may be 50,000 opportunities in the country) should be the same.

The Alliance this year will be working hard to make it easier for Western irrigators to develop new low-head hydropower. A preferable fix would be a new exemption category for low-head

hydro in irrigation projects that does not require federal agency interaction. For more complicated projects that still fall under the existing FERC 5 megawatt exemption ceiling but exceed this new minimum threshold (whatever that may be), the process must be streamlined. We also want the Bureau of Reclamation to aggressively work with its water customers to find ways to get more low-head projects built into the existing delivery system.

The federal response was very favorable to our initial proposal, and officials in Washington appeared eager to start looking at administrative means to ease permitting of these projects. We will see how things develop in the coming months.