

## Work begins tearing down 1920s-era Eklutna River dam

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At 400 feet tall, the biggest crane in Alaska is working to lower equipment to the site of the Eklutna River dam that is being demolished by Eklutna Inc. this summer. The dam was built in the 1920s and over the years became a dumping ground for everything from televisions to derelict cars. (Photo/Courtesy/Eklutna Inc.)



Restoring salmon habitat on the Eklutna River is the goal of demolishing a dam that was built in the 1920s to supply power to Anchorage. (Photo/Courtesy/Eklutna Inc.)

Deconstructing the old dam wedged in an Eklutna River ravine begins this month, a megaproject to eventually help native salmon return to home waters.

The \$7.5 million project is funded by the Conservation Fund in a partnership with Eklutna Inc., which is providing the labor, Eklutna CEO Curtis McQueen said June 5 at the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce Make it Monday Forum.

Eklutna Inc. became the default owners of the derelict dam because it was built there in 1929 on the traditionally Dena'ina Athabaskan land. It was abandoned after World War II when the new Eklutna dam began to supply more power to the burgeoning wartime Anchorage population.

Now the task is to take the dam out, McQueen said.

"More than 300,000 cubic squares of sediment has built up, along with junk cars, television sets and all kinds of trash thrown there," he said.

Much of that was taken out last year. This summer's work involves installing a system to secure the job site and make it safe so that large concrete slabs can be chiseled into smaller chunks.

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It takes the largest crane known to exist in Alaska to handle the job, McQueen said. Getting the crane to the work area took 40 tractor-trailer trucks. At 400 feet tall, the crane is charged with the task of lowering bulldozers and other equipment about 200 feet into the canyon. The crane was installed in last season's work.

For the workers, there aren't a lot of places to stand. Rock falls down the cliff face. Descending the canyon couldn't be done without the 700-foot staircase built to secure the work site last year.

Now the site is staged for the work to begin breaking into the dam's concrete edifice but a few more permits are needed, McQueen said.

McQueen believes Eklutna is the first Tribe in the nation to get involved in such a massive project, he told the Chamber.

"We haven't heard of another story where the actual Native people are playing a part in the removal of a dam," he said.

Brad Meiklejohn, Alaska State Director of the Conservation Fund, said the project has historic ramifications not only for dismantling the dam. It signifies the first step in the long process of restoring the Eklutna River's historic salmon populations — and it rights an historical wrong.

"The village is there because there used to be a lot of salmon. The dam got built without consulting them and the fish population really dropped off," Meiklejohn said. "This is something that happened to them. They're the ones who are fixing it, taking care of someone else's mess. They are fixing a mistaken artifact of history. (The project) restores the fish and makes amends for some of the things we did wrong."

So far, \$6.5 million has been raised by the Fund, Meiklejohn said, with another \$1 million needed. Further funding sources include foundations that hopefully will include the Rasmuson Foundation, he said.

Almost daily, Meiklejohn visits the work site, now as an impressed observer. He watches from the top of the canyon and tries to stay out of the way.

"This operation is one of the more dramatic work sites that I know of. You're on the (top) end of one the largest staircases. It's like St. John's Cathedral," he said.

The giant crane's role is to lower the equipment into the canyon. That includes huge bulldozers and excavators suspended off spooled crane cables until they touch down.

Large pneumatic chisels will bite into the concrete, which bulldozers will then maneuver to the side.

"A big part of the project is managing all the sand and gravel that has built up since it was abandoned, 300,000 cubic yards of sand and gravel. They use the equipment to move the sediment so they can get to the dam," he described.

Water is diverted by pipe around the worksite to make it as dry as possible, he said.

The wild canyon tucked away from sight near Thunderbird Falls isn't wide. But it's been a dumping ground for anything wanted to be disposed over the cliff: televisions, scrap metal, tires and even old cars, said Noel Aspiras, an Eklutna Inc., real estate and land development specialist.

Eklutna used a drone, which was much less expensive than hiring a helicopter, to take reconnaissance of the area for video and photos that then helped in planning.

A helicopter pad is built onsite in case of emergency, Aspiras said, once work begins.

The derelict dam in question — also called an "orphan dam" because no one in present day claims ownership — was built between 1927-29 by the Anchorage Light and Power Co.

Frank Reed, a pioneering Anchorage businessman and filmmaker, spotted the natural landslide dam while walking in the Eklutna valley in the 1920s, according to Anchorage 1910-1940 Legends & Legacies.

He spotted it for a hydro project to supply some of the first electricity to the Anchorage area. Construction of the 70-foot tall concrete arch dam was a major feat, but proved a success when it provided electricity for the young city of Anchorage until it was shuttered in 1952.

After the land came under Eklutna title following passage of the 1971 Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act, the idea of tearing it down to bring salmon back became a dream that seemed impossible without strategy or funds to get it done.

McQueen told the Anchorage Chamber that of the many Eklutna projects his corporation is in charge of around the state, he's proud of this one as a bipartisan effort and grateful for the help of the Conservation Fund.

"One thing we in Alaska all agree on is that kings are impacted in north Cook Inlet.

"This is a positive project to restore watershed and get salmon up the river again," McQueen said. "Everyone is for it."