

Can a pumped storage project exist on a Wild and Scenic river?

SHERIDAN, Wyo. — A Wild and Scenic Designation and a 1,000-megawatt pumped storage project could coexist on a Wyoming portion of the Little Bighorn River under a plan released by the U.S. Forest Service. The agency's draft environmental impact statement recommends the wild and scenic designation for 16.9 miles of the 19.2-mile-long Wild & Scenic Study Corridor located in the Bighorn National Forest.

The draft study was prepared in response to a proposal by Little Bighorn Energy, Inc., to build a hydroelectric facility on Dry Creek, a tributary of the Little Bighorn, in an area that had previously been identified as eligible for wild and scenic designation.

The corridor is a relatively narrow canyon with 1,000-foot walls. Elk, moose, black bear, and mountain lion occupy the area. Trout fishing is excellent, but fishing pressure is light because of the area's inaccessibility and distance from major population centers. The scenery is "outstandingly remarkable . . . characterized by the towering, colorful cliffs rising above the river, the river gorges, and the many series of

rapids," according to the Forest Service. "Winding trails along the river's edge provide a constant change in the scenic vista." The river is not floatable.

The pumped storage project "would result in a significantly increased tax base and employment opportunities for Sheridan County, Wyo., according to the study. However, it could affect an elk migration range and would flood a portion of an official trail. "The Forest Service would not permit any development on the Dry Fork unless a detailed site-specific analysis and development of mitigation measures . . . indicated that the desired downstream value and condition of the land could be maintained. This includes provisions for maintaining instream flows for stream channel maintenance and visual quality," the Forest Service promised.

The study emphasized that a final recommendation favoring the shortened Wild and Scenic Corridor "would not imply that any water development necessarily would be approved; that decision would be the subject of a future project-specific environmental analysis."