

Ashton Dam Project Wraps Up
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By Zach Kyle

After three years of construction and a few setbacks, the Ashton Dam reconstruction project is coming to an end.

Officials for PacifiCorp, which operates the dam as part of Rocky Mountain Power, said they will begin refilling the Ashton Reservoir today. The reservoir was drawn down so crews could work on the dam's base.

PacifiCorp officials and river advocates alike are pleased the project ended without any significant environmental hazards despite all the obstacles crews had to overcome to complete it.

"It's been a lengthy process, and we've overcome significant challenges along the way," project manager Troy Stout said in an email. "There is a feeling of relief in finally reaching this point."

Work and cleanup on the dam will continue to the end of December, but the hard work is done, Rocky Mountain Power spokesman Jeff Hymas said. The reservoir will be refilled by 1 foot per day except for scheduled pauses. The water level will increase 26 feet to normal levels by mid-December, when it will reopen for recreational use, Hymas said.

Crews overcame several snags before completing the project, most recently when water from the reservoir seeped under the coffer dam built to keep the work area dry. PacifiCorp solved the problem after discovering a wall built into the dam foundation. Crews dug down to unearth the wall, which sheltered the area from the seepage and enabled the workers to finish the project without additional draw-downs.

Officials from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game were concerned reservoir draw-downs would introduce damaging sediment into the Henry's Fork of the Snake River. PacifiCorp drew down the reservoir several times during the project. However, the draw-downs did not have the fish habitat-scrambling effects many feared, said Dan Garren, Fish and Game's fisheries manager in the Upper Snake Region.

"We will monitor over the next year, but if there was anything catastrophic, we'd certainly know it by now," Garren said. "It's pretty amazing we got through this without anything catastrophic happening."

The Henry's Fork Foundation also was concerned about the draw-downs.

Brandon Hoffner, the foundation's executive director, said PacifiCorp did "about as well as they could have" to provide information and take feedback.

"I know a lot of people who will be happy to put (the project) in the rearview mirror," Hoffner said. "Thanks to them for doing a good job and getting it all complete on time."

The draw-downs caused the water levels in canals to fluctuate, said Dale Swensen, executive director of the Fremont-Madison Irrigation District, which oversees irrigation in the area.

However, farmers never went without water, Swensen said.

"The (draw-downs) caused some minor problems with irrigation deliveries to canals below the dam," Swensen said. "It will be nice to not have those river fluctuations."

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