

Ashton Dam dewatering project nears

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The next phase of repairs to the Ashton Dam will include a partial dewatering of a deep pool just downstream of the dam's powerhouse.

Starting at the end of this month, workers will begin the process of lowering the pool's level in order to repair concrete buttresses at the base of the powerhouse. They will pump water out of the pool, and a barrier made of metal and fabric will keep water from flowing back into it, said Dave Eskelsen, a spokesman for PacifiCorp, the utility company that owns and operates the dam.

Eskelsen said the pool, a popular spot for anglers, won't be completely emptied. Instead of removing fish that inhabit the pool and placing them somewhere else, workers will leave the fish where they are. The barrier will allow for some interchange of water.

"There'll still be some water in the area that the fish can survive in," Eskelsen said. "They reasoned that that would be less stressful for the fish due to the freezing temperatures."

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game has helped PacifiCorp develop plans for protecting fish throughout the dam repair process, said Dan Garren, fisheries manager for Fish and Game's Upper Snake Region. Garren agreed with Eskelsen that leaving fish in the pool is preferable to moving them.

"If you're moving around fish, first off you've got to shock them, and then you're handling them and it's cold, and then you're in a truck and you're moving them," he said. "It can be stressful."

Garren said workers can pump fresh water into the pool if necessary.

Kim Ragotzkie, stewardship director for the conservationist group Henry's Fork Foundation, said PacifiCorp officials so far have demonstrated responsible handling of repairs and have been sensitive to the concerns of anglers and conservationists.

"We're actually feeling really comfortable working with them," Ragotzkie said. "When we first heard about this project a few years ago, let's just say we didn't have a very good relationship with PacifiCorp, and that has so totally changed."

PacifiCorp began looking into repairs to the Ashton Dam in 2004. Completed in 1916, the dam has been plagued with sinkholes for decades.

Company officials believe sinkholes develop because fine particles designed to restrain water flow were placed directly behind the dam's large-particle barrier. Very slowly, water from the reservoir has pushed the fine particles through the much more porous large-particle barrier. The displacement of fine particles creates cavities in the fill, which in turn lead to sinkholes in the dam's crest.

PacifiCorp plans to replace the existing fill with a more gradual and uniform coarse-to-fine progression of fill behind the large-particle barrier. The company will replace thousands of yards of "silty sands" with several distinct layers of coarse gravel, fine gravel, sand and soil. Gravel will be spread over the soil to hold it in place.

PacifiCorp hopes to complete the concrete repair work by the end of April, Eskelsen said. Sometime this spring, the reservoir is scheduled to be lowered for the final stretch of repairs. The entire project should be finished by the end of the year, Eskelsen said.
