



June 27, 2023

Chugach Electric Association Board of Directors
5601 Electron Drive
Anchorage, AK 99518

Dear Chugach Electric Association Board of Directors,

Thank you for providing reliable energy to southcentral Alaska and for the opportunity for Trout Unlimited to contribute to the development of the mitigation plan for the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project as a member of the Technical Working Group. We are writing to express our concerns about flaws in how the utilities are conducting the mitigation process and the inadequacies of the alternatives the utilities have proposed for mitigating the long-deferred impacts to Eklutna River fish and wildlife and their habitat, and the people who depend on them. Trout Unlimited and our more than 500 members who are also CEA or MEA members, are enthused by the potential to rebuild the wild salmon stocks lost by the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project by reconnecting salmon habitat and reviving a river of historical importance to the Eklutna peoples.

If the utilities continue on their current track, the final fish and wildlife program will fail to restore plentiful runs of wild salmon, especially sockeye salmon that must be able to migrate into and out of Eklutna Lake, perpetuate decades-long injustices toward the Eklutna people, and fail to live up to Congress' intent to provide mitigation beyond what would have been achieved through a traditional FERC-licensing process. On page 19 of the Divestiture Report prepared by the Department of Energy it is made clear that mitigating the loss of the Eklutna sockeye run was a specific problem that led to the creation of the 1991 Agreement. Additionally, on page 20, the report says, "The August 7, 1991, Agreement affords fish and wildlife interests a stronger voice in project management than would be available under continued Federal ownership", setting a standard for mitigation above FERC-licensing that we don't believe is being met.

The successful completion of the lower Eklutna Dam removal in 2018 reconnected roughly 8 miles of habitat between the abandoned lower dam and the upper diversion dam for the first time in nearly a century, receiving broad public and political support for a restored Eklutna River. Sadly, salmon are still unable to utilize historic habitat that was reconnected due to inadequate streamflow in this downstream of the diversion dam, nor can they access to the East Fork & West Fork of the Eklutna River which [research conducted by Native Village of Eklutna](#) concluded offers miles of additional salmon habitat.

Considering the infrastructure of the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project and its water management, wild salmon need adequate water and fish passage to rebound, and technical experts consistently agree. The [report from the 2018 Eklutna River Workshop](#), numerous statements and resolutions from Native Village of Eklutna, and comments by NOAA and USFWS lay out that the two main principles that should guide the mitigation are (1) year-round streamflow through the entire length of the Eklutna River watershed that is patterned after a natural hydrograph; and (2) reconnecting Eklutna Lake by providing volitional fish passage upstream and downstream from the lake.

Since the mitigation process was initiated in 2019, our staff have been active participants in the Technical Working Group to provide input and recommendations. Following two years of field studies, the utilities are

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PO Box 220834 / Anchorage, AK / 99502

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now considering various mitigation alternatives that may, to varying degrees, make up for the Eklutna Hydropower Project's impacts to fish and wildlife and their habitat. However, as TU has expressed at numerous Technical Working Group meetings and through various written comments, the mitigation process has many flaws. Some of the most serious include:

- There has been no accounting of the various impacts to fish and wildlife and their habitat, including all socioeconomic and cultural impacts, as would normally occur through a FERC licensing process or an Environmental Impact Statement, which makes it impossible to determine how well (or poorly) the alternatives under consideration mitigate for those impacts.
- The instream flow and habitat models fail to accurately account for potential habitat gains or losses from the various alternatives. For example, the models show that 99% of available coho spawning habitat is achieved with less than 10% of historic stream flow. This result defies logic and, as comments from USFWS detail, cannot be relied upon to predict potential habitat gains.
- The alternatives analysis significantly undervalues potential habitat in Eklutna Lake and its upstream tributaries and fails to account for potential benefits and impacts to sockeye salmon spawning, rearing and overwintering habitat. These deficiencies are highlighted by the significant differences between potential habitat observed by the utilities and their contractors compared to that observed by scientists for the NVE's Land & Environment Department.
- The utilities and their consultants failed to consider or analyze decommissioning the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project despite repeated claims that all options were on the table. While we are not advocating for shuttering the project, an analysis that included it as an alternative would be important for setting a baseline of comparison for all the other alternatives.
- While we have had many positive interactions with the utilities and their consultants during the mitigation process, several recent actions by the utilities have caused alarm. First, utilities and their consultants refused to complete a robust instream flow study in the second year of study plans as was requested by the NVE, USFWS, NOAA, and Trout Unlimited—which ultimately resulted in the USFWS and NOAA refusing to consent to the study plans. Second, the utilities have stood in the way of efforts by NVE and others to secure funding that might help supplement mitigation efforts undertaken by the utilities. Third, and most recently, every alternative proposed by the utilities through the Technical Working Group failed to provide water along at least some portion of the Eklutna River and failed to provide salmon access to Eklutna Lake or its upstream habitat—meaning the utilities failed to propose even one alternative capable of returning sockeye salmon. Moving forward, the utilities should recommit themselves to meaningful mitigation by only considering alternatives that provide water the entire length of the Eklutna River and provide volitional fish passage into and out of Eklutna Lake.

The operators of the Eklutna Hydroelectric Project have operated the project for 32 years knowing they had an obligation to make up for the project's impact to fish and wildlife and their habitat. Now is the time to restore wild salmon to the Eklutna River and there has never been a better opportunity for Chugach Electric Association, Matanuska Electric Association, and the Municipality of Anchorage to lead in writing a successful next chapter in the Alaska wild salmon story and make good on their obligation to Alaskans and the Eklutna People, all while continuing to provide reliable and affordable power.

Sincerely,



Eric Booton
Eklutna Project Manager
Trout Unlimited