

FERC sets Alaska LNG schedule, with December 2019 for final EIS

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The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) on March 12 published its timeline for the Alaska LNG project's environmental review, setting Dec. 9, 2019, for when it plans to issue its final environmental impact statement and a 90-day later March 8, 2020, deadline to decide on the state's application to build and operate the gas pipeline, liquefaction plant, and export terminal.

FERC plans to issue the project's draft environmental impact statement (EIS) in March 2019, allowing nine months for public and agency comments and revisions before the final EIS.

A March 2020 decision by the full commission is 15 months later than the Alaska Gasline Development Corp. (AGDC) had requested and promoted when it filed its application with FERC in April 2017. To meet its proposed start-up date of first LNG exports in 2024, "AGDC requests FERC grant the requested authorization no later than December 31, 2018," the state corporation said in the cover letter accompanying its application.

AGDC has been working toward a final investment decision in 2019 on the \$43 billion state-led project to move Alaska North Slope gas to market, producing up to 20 million tonnes of LNG per year at a liquefaction plant in Nikiski on Cook Inlet. Waiting until 2020 for federal approval will likely change the state's development schedule.

The corporation may not start any on-site construction work on the pipeline, LNG plant, or other project components without FERC authorization, and usually project developers don't place binding orders for expensive pipe, compressors, and other project components until final regulatory approvals are in hand.

FERC staff and the commission's third-party contractor have been compiling information for the Alaska project's draft EIS, while waiting on the state to supply missing information and additional data requested by FERC and other federal regulatory agencies. AGDC on March 7 told FERC it would take until June to supply some of the information, with a delivery date for still more of the data dependent on further clarification from regulators. FERC and state representatives will meet in Washington, D.C., on March 22 to discuss the state's request for clarification of the information requests so that AGDC can determine if additional field work or studies are required.

FERC included standard language in its Notice of Schedule for Environmental Review on March 12: "If a schedule change becomes necessary for the final EIS, an additional notice will be provided."

The notice also included a brief summation of the major issues that will be addressed in the EIS: “Impacts on traditional Alaska Native culture, particularly subsistence; health impacts on local communities; impacts on wetlands, including through placement of permanent gravel fill; visual impacts from key observation points, including within the Denali National Park and Preserve; impacts of dredging and identification of disposal methods; wildlife impacts, specifically on the caribou population and its migration routes, the endangered Cook Inlet beluga whale population, and Cook Inlet fish habitat; and transportation impacts.”

Cooperating agencies with FERC in preparation of the single federal EIS for the Alaska project are: The Pipeline and Hazardous Material Safety Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, Army Corps of Engineers, Coast Guard, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Park Service, and Department of Energy.