

ESTES

September 7, 1978

Honorable Senator Mike Gravel  
United States Senate  
3121 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Gravel:

I have just completed reading an article attributed to you in the recent issue (Vol. VI, No. 2) of Catalyst. In your article, you discuss the great potential for hydroelectric development in Alaska and the need to properly plan for such development and other land uses. I could not agree with you more that the key to the future orderly development of Alaska's land and water resources lays in proper and timely planning. It is the issue of planning for fish and wildlife needs that prompts my concern with your Catalyst article.

The proposed Susitna River hydroelectric project is presented in your article as a project embraced by environmentalists and having no effect on fish life. As to the former assertion, I have no comment. I am, however, concerned with the abrupt dismissal of the fishery values of the Susitna River represented in your latter statement.

The main purpose of this letter is to appraise you and your Washington staff of the progress to date by the Department of Fish and Game's field staff in compiling baseline pre-impoundment fish and wildlife resource data. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has conducted baseline environmental fisheries studies since 1974 in the upper and lower Susitna River drainages with limited financial support from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Federal funding of this Department's activities terminated December 31, 1977, with considerable study of the project's impact on fish and wildlife resources yet to be accomplished, but with sufficient information on hand to allow us to state that fish and wildlife resources will be adversely impacted. The construction and subsequent operation of the Devils Canyon and Watana dams will result in long-term ecological changes. Most notably, the level and flow patterns of the Susitna River will be altered in significant ways and will create adverse impacts to fisheries resources both upstream and, more importantly, downstream of the proposed dams.

The Susitna River basin has long been recognized as an area of high recreational and aesthetic appeal as well as important habitat to a wide variety of fish species. The majority of the chinook, coho, chum, and pink salmon production in the Cook Inlet area occurs within this drainage. Grayling, rainbow trout, Dolly Varden, lake trout, and whitefish are some of the abundant and important resident species of fish utilized by Alaskans and visitors in this area. It is important to note that although the Susitna River is glacial and turbid more than half of the year, the river clears during the winter months and becomes the major winter-rearing area for salmonids as its tributaries freeze and dewater.

For example, chinook and coho salmon, which are of high interest to both commercial harvesters and sport anglers in the Cook Inlet area are dependent on the freshwater rearing areas of the Susitna for a period of one to two years before migrating to saltwater. These important rearing areas will be lost downstream of the dams because the river will be turbid year-round and seasonal flow and stage will be the reverse of natural conditions after construction.

Our preliminary studies have partially defined that the effects of impoundment and construction activities will include alteration of the natural flow regimes, water temperatures, water chemistry, transport of materials and the quantity of wetted habitat. These changes will disrupt the trophic structure and habitat composition downstream from the dam, and will eventually reduce or eliminate certain terrestrial and aquatic populations.

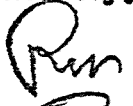
In response to your recent comments, I have concentrated herein on fisheries issues. Fisheries studies relating to the Hydroelectric Project on the Susitna were not conducted this year due to lack of funding; however, wildlife associated studies were continued with \$16,500 in State funds. When Federal assistance lapsed, the Alaska Power Authority recognized the economic and biological benefits of continuing moose radio-telemetry studies with presently radio-collared animals and provided the necessary funding.

Additional Federal funding, unfortunately, terminated due to U.S. Corps of Engineers priorities in other areas. Your article referred to the Phase I activities relating to the Susitna Dam: "At present, the Corps is at the proposed sites conducting Phase I activities, which include complete design and cost/benefit analyses as well as a Final Environmental Impact Statement." Actually, the Corps of Engineers is conducting their foundation studies at the damsites while no fisheries work is underway at the present time. Without adequate funding and sufficiently timed preconstruction Phase I studies to further assess and define the magnitude of impact from the proposed construction activity and from operation of the facilities, a final Environmental Impact Statement cannot be prepared and will result in a delay of a construction decision. It is important to note that mitigation features have not yet been defined to offset anticipated impacts to fish and wildlife resources between the impoundment area and downstream from the dam site.

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I hope that my comments and the enclosed draft on this Department's 1977-78 field progress report will assist you in evaluating this important project. Please feel free to call me for any additional information. There is the serious matter of funding to continue our pre-impoundment studies, and as a member of the Environmental and Public Works Committee perhaps you could assist in this regard.

Sincerely,

  
Ronald O. Skoog  
Commissioner

Enclosure

cc: Honorable Ted Stevens  
Honorable Donald E. Young

bcc: T. Trent  
R. Andrews  
R. Logan