

Planting seed for ‘beautiful result’

Thank you for covering the Chilchinbeto Pumped Storage Hydropower Project in your May 25 issue. We write to provide more information about the Project and why the Chilchinbeto Chapter leadership and the Chapter members support it.

The current leadership of the Chilchinbeto Chapter was elected to actively improve our members’ standard of living through economic development while respecting our land. Thus, in our leadership role we have sought out development opportunities.

The idea for a pumped storage hydropower project came to us in 2021 and we investigated the technology and the impact on the environment. We found that the technology is proven, and the Project will contribute to the reliability of electricity in the Nation and the region. Potentially Project infrastructure can help the Nation to build more solar projects.

We found that the impact of the Project to be small while the benefit to the Nation is large. The Project will use only a small amount of Chapter land, about 100 acres on the mesa and 100 acres at the base of the mesa – less than the grazing area of two cows. The funding of programs to increase biodiversity will more than offset any loss from construction.

After gaining a full understanding of the Project, we proposed, and Chilchinbeto Chapter has voted to support the Chilchinbeto Pumped Hydro Storage Project. The Project will bring jobs, water, improved roads, improved broadband, economic development, and funding for cultural and other activities to our Chapter and the Nation.

People are the most important natural resource of the Chilchinbeto Chapter. The only employers here are the BIA school, Canyonland clinic and the Chapter, collectively only 26 jobs. We were elected to bring jobs to the Chapter and the Project is anticipated to bring directly or indirectly 1,000 jobs during construction and 100 permanent jobs. The Project will bring funding for training so that Nation and Chapter members qualify for most of these jobs. Thus, the project follows the Diné teaching of T’áá hwó’ ajít’éego, self-reliance or self-determination.

For Chapter members living on top of Black Mesa, the Project will improve their lives in several ways. The road to the top of the mesa is frequently impassable. Just this winter a snowmobile had to be rented to bring a member food and medicine. Moreover, these members have to drive two hours for their water and only can do so when the road is passable. Furthermore, all Chapter members will benefit from water being available locally, particularly as climate change threatens our farms and livestock.

Water is life and a great concern particularly in our area.

We share these concerns. Thankfully the wells on Black Mesa have recovered over 50% and the aquifer is strong. Our first preference is for the Project to use river water. For example, if the Nation decides to use Colorado River water throughout Nation land, the Project could help pay for the pipeline for the good of many. We welcome finding a way to bring Colorado River water to Chilchinbeto.

Unfortunately, we can’t depend upon river water being available so we must consider using our own water under Chapter land carefully. The Project will use 6,000 acre-feet and minimize water use by creating a closed loop so when the Project is operating, water will flow up and down the mesa over and over. Evaporation of less than 500 acre-feet per year will be reduced by installing floating solar panels or other methods. If river water cannot be arranged, a small portion of aquifer water, significantly less than 0.1%, will be used for the Project.

We feel using a small amount of aquifer water is a worthwhile use considering the benefits the Project can create for the Nation. Project payments to the Nation can help pay for the electrification of remote homes, road repair, broadband, veterans, housing, scholarships, and other government programs. Under consideration is the option of Nation majority ownership of the Project. T’áá hwó’ ajít’éego’.

In closing, while we respect that some chapters on Black Mesa do not want to pursue a pumped storage hydropower project at this time, upon further reflection and as our project moves forward, we hope other chapters will see that using a small portion of their land and water for a project will be in the interest of their members, their children, and their grandchildren.

As President Nygren has said, “The Navajo Nation has always been an energy Nation, hands down. We do not live next to Phoenix. We do not live next to metropolitan areas. But what we do have is what we have always had, energy. Whether it is oil and gas, whether it’s coal, solar, no other tribe can even match us.”

When President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer signed the Navajo Sunrise (Hayoółkáát) Proclamation, President Nez said the proclamation “creates a new economic vision for the Navajo people through healing the land, fostering clean energy development and providing leadership for the energy market.”

He went on to say, “This is nothing new to us as indigenous peoples — being stewards of the land and using what Creator has given us in terms of natural resources. It’s time for our land to heal and become green again. What we’re doing today is planting a seed for our future and for our younger generation.” The Chilchinbeto Pumped Storage Hydropower Project will be one beautiful result of planting this seed. T’áá hwó’ ajít’éego’.

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