

# **Chili Bar Hydroelectric Project FERC Project No. 2155, California Negative Declaration**

Prepared for  
**State Water Resources Control Board  
Division of Water Rights**

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# **Negative Declaration Pacific Gas & Electric Company Chili Bar Hydroelectric Project FERC Project No. 2155, California**

## **Lead Agency:**

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## **Introduction**

The Project consists of the continued operation of the Chili Bar Hydroelectric Project (Chili Bar Project), Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) Project No. 2155, owned and operated by the Pacific Gas and Electric Company (PG&E), under a new 30- to 50-year FERC license, as described under the terms of a *Relicensing Settlement Agreement for the Upper American River Project and Chili Bar Hydroelectric Project* (Settlement Agreement)<sup>1</sup>. The Chili Bar Project is located on the South Fork of the American River (SF American River) in El Dorado County, near Placerville, California. The purposes of the Chili Bar Project are to generate power, and provide minor flood control benefits, while meeting water quality standards in the SF American River. The Chili Bar Powerhouse has an installed capacity of seven megawatts (MW) and an average annual generation of 32,291 megawatt hours (MWh) per year of energy.

To receive a new FERC operating license, PG&E is required to request and receive water quality certification (WQC) pursuant to Section 401 of the federal Clean Water Act from the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board). The State Water Board is the lead agency responsible for complying with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). For the State Water Board to issue a WQC, an environmental analysis of the project that complies with CEQA must be prepared.

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<sup>1</sup> The Settlement Agreement was finalized on January 29, 2007 by state and federal agencies and other interested stakeholders. The State Water Board is not a signatory to the Settlement Agreement but State Water Board staff did provide guidance during the development of the Settlement Agreement conditions. The Settlement Agreement is available on the State Water Board website at: [http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water\\_issues/programs/water\\_quality\\_cert/ceqa\\_projects.shtml#chili](http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/waterrights/water_issues/programs/water_quality_cert/ceqa_projects.shtml#chili) (Last visited: October 12, 2012).

## **Project Description**

The project is the continued operation of the Chili Bar Project pursuant to a new 30- to 50-year FERC license, as described in the terms of a Settlement Agreement. The Chili Bar Project was placed in operation in 1965 under its existing FERC license.

The Chili Bar Project facilities are located on the SF American River immediately downstream of the Sacramento Municipal Utility District's (SMUD's) Upper American River Project (UARP), near Placerville. The Chili Bar Project facilities consist of: (1) a concrete gravity dam that is 126 feet high and 380 feet long with a dam spillway that is 170 feet long with a crest elevation of 997.5 feet (National Geodetic Vertical Datum) located 31 feet below the crest of the dam; (2) a reservoir with a surface area of 110 acres and a useable storage capacity of 1,339 acre-feet at a normal operating minimum elevation 984 feet (National Geodetic Vertical Datum); and (3) a powerhouse that is 80 square feet containing a single turbine unit with a normal maximum gross head of 60 feet, a maximum hydraulic capacity of 1,979 cubic feet per second (cfs), and an installed capacity of seven MW. There is no project transmission line because the 21-kilovolt (kV) switchyard connects directly to the local distribution grid. PG&E does not plan any changes to the existing Chili Bar Project facilities; the Project will be operated in accordance with the new FERC license.

The existing FERC-license boundary for the Chili Bar Project ranges from approximately 50 to 250 feet on either side of the river, and starts approximately 320 feet downstream of Chili Bar Dam to approximately 3.2 miles upstream of the dam. Property bordering the Project is a mix of PG&E, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), SMUD's UARP and private ownership. PG&E proposes to revise the FERC Project boundary by reducing the acreage within the current boundary from 254.63 acres to 103.14 acres.

The Chili Bar Powerhouse has a semi-automatic operation and is operated from PG&E's Wise Switching Center located approximately 35 miles away, in Auburn, California. Because the Chili Bar Project has limited reservoir storage, PG&E operates the Project using the flow releases from SMUD's upstream White Rock powerhouse on a daily basis. Typically, the Chili Bar Project stores the releases from White Rock during off-peak hours, and generates electricity during peak load hours. Therefore, flows downstream of Chili Bar Dam often fluctuate daily. Given that White Rock powerhouse has a flow capacity of almost twice as much as Chili Bar Powerhouse, the Chili Bar Project also sometimes spills flow in excess of its generating capacity at Chili Bar Dam. Implementation of the coordination agreement with SMUD that is part of the Settlement Agreement is meant to reduce the occurrence of spills at Chili Bar Dam.

## **Operational Changes and Settlement Agreement Measures**

PG&E proposes to implement the following Settlement Agreement measures at the Chili Bar Project:

- New minimum streamflows and ramping rates
- A Coordination Agreement with SMUD to implement new flow requirements and other Settlement Agreement conditions
- A plan to monitor streamflows and reservoir elevations
- An annual review of listed special-status plants and wildlife that could potentially be present on BLM land, together with study requirements for newly listed species that

includes identifying provisions for protecting listed species during any new construction or maintenance activities

- A monitoring program to determine the effects of new streamflow requirements and other Project effects on native fish populations, aquatic macroinvertebrates, amphibians and reptiles, riparian habitat, algal species, geomorphology, water temperature, and water quality in Chili Bar Reservoir and the downstream reach of the SF American River
- Monitoring for metals bioaccumulation in resident fish in Chili Bar Reservoir
- An adaptive management program
- A sediment management plan
- A vegetation and invasive weed management plan for the control of noxious weeds
- Public information services that include real-time streamflow and reservoir level
- Provision of specified recreational boating flows
- A visual resource protection plan
- An Historic Properties Management Plan to protect cultural resources

These measures are described in more detail in the Settlement Agreement.

## **Recreation**

PG&E proposes, as outlined in Article 2-13 of the Settlement Agreement, to:

- Construct a gravel parking area for three to four vehicles off Rock Creek Road
- Develop the 36-inch-wide Sand Bar Trail that meets a grade of five percent or less from the parking area to Chili Bar Reservoir
- Install a kiosk sign along the trail near its beginning, explaining the rules of the area
- Install one picnic table of coated wire mesh material on a leveled out area that is outside of the floodplain

PG&E also included measures in its proposed project to assure that potential impacts associated with construction of the recreation improvements are less than significant. These include measures to reduce air quality impacts associated with fugitive dust and impacts to cultural resources associated with the discovery of human remains during construction.

There are currently no formal recreational facilities within the Chili Bar Project boundary. PG&E currently manages an informal boat launch at the Chili Bar Dam. The boat launch is not accessible to the public; it is used by PG&E infrequently and exclusively for Project inspection and maintenance purposes.

FERC has conducted operational inspections of the Chili Bar Project throughout its period of operation, focusing on the continued safety of the structures, identification of unauthorized modifications, efficiency and safety of operations, compliance with the terms of the license, and proper maintenance. The Chili Bar Project has been inspected and evaluated every five years by an independent consultant, and a consultant's safety report has been filed with

FERC for its review. These inspections will continue throughout the term of any new license issued by FERC.

The baseline for evaluating the potential significant environmental impacts of the Chili Bar Project includes the existing facilities and operations. Therefore, this Initial Study and Negative Declaration evaluate the potential impacts from the additional recreational facilities, from changes in Chili Bar Project operation, and from any current operations that will result in a more severe impact than currently occurs over the lifetime of the Chili Bar Project.

## Findings and Determination


Revisions in the Chili Bar Project plans or proposals already made by, or agreed to, by PG&E will avoid or reduce any negative environmental impacts to a point where no significant impact on the environment will occur.

There is no substantial evidence in light of the whole record before the public agency that the Chili Bar Project may have a significant impact on the environment.

On the basis of this evaluation, the State Water Board concludes:

- a. Implementation of the Chili Bar Project will not degrade the quality of the environment, substantially reduce the habitat of a fish or wildlife species, cause a fish or wildlife population to drop below self-sustaining levels, threaten to eliminate a plant or animal community, reduce the number or restrict the range of a rare or endangered plant or animal, or eliminate important examples of the major periods of California history or prehistory.
- b. Implementation of the Chili Bar Project will not have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable.
- c. Implementation of the Chili Bar Project will not have environmental effects that will cause substantial adverse effects on human beings, either directly or indirectly.

Once approved, this Negative Declaration will be filed pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines.

  
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Barbara Evoy

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Deputy Director for Water Rights  
(Title)

*Nov. 2, 2012*  
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(Date)