

# [***ARTICLE: The Little Colorado River Project: Is New Hydropower Development the Key to a Renewable Energy Future, or the Vestige of a Failed Past?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=analytical-materials&id=urn:contentItem:623Y-7JV1-JJK6-S2DV-00000-00&context=1516831)

Winter, 2021

**Reporter**

32 Colo. Nat. Res. Energy & Envtl. L. Rev. 41 \*

**Length:** 27019 words

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**Text**

**[\*42]**

Introduction

The ***Colorado*** Plateau consists of a series of stunning plateaus and mesas, all situated within a larger basin. [[1]](#footnote-2)1Despite being categorized as an arid region, perhaps the most crucial element in shaping the Plateau's geography, as well as its human past, is its hydrology. The principal water body on the Plateau is the ***Colorado*** ***River***. Originating in the Rocky Mountains, it flows west through ***Colorado***, Utah, and Arizona, eventually draining into the Gulf of California in Mexico. [[2]](#footnote-3)2The ***Colorado*** ***River*** basin drains 242,000 square miles of land in the United States, and is the main source of water on the Plateau. [[3]](#footnote-4)3Additionally, major tributaries, such as **[\*43]**the Little ***Colorado*** ***River***, play important roles in the Plateau's culture and ecology. [[4]](#footnote-5)4Over millions of years, these water systems worked tirelessly to erode the Plateau into its distinct terrain. And in modern history, they have become crucial players in the development of agriculture, urbanization, and energy, both on and off the Plateau. Decades of excessive dam-building harnessed the powers of these ***rivers*** and their tributaries, providing flood control, irrigation water, and hydroelectricity for growing communities.

Indigenous peoples have called the ***Colorado*** Plateau home for millennia. Tribes like the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe live near the ***Colorado*** ***River***, relying on its tributaries for irrigation, sustenance, and ritual ceremonies. Over the last century and a half, Anglo-American settlers have developed a presence on the ***Colorado*** Plateau, shipping its resources out of the region to develop metropolises like Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake City. This is especially true of energy development, where coal plants, uranium mining, and hydroelectric facilities have altered the landscape while hampering indigenous livelihoods. The development and exploitation of Plateau resources at the expense of tribal communities has contributed to economic, political, and sociocultural pressures that induce a wariness of further energy development in the region.

Water's role in economic development, as well as its cultural significance, continues to stoke controversy around the Plateau. Following Congress's passage of America's Water Infrastructure Act in 2018, various developers proposed a spate of new hydropower projects to meet state renewable energy goals. Perhaps the most contentious proposal is the Little ***Colorado*** ***River*** Project ("LCR Project"). The Little ***Colorado*** ***River*** meets with the larger ***Colorado*** ***River*** on the eastern edge of the Grand Canyon, forming a scenic confluence where aquamarine-blue waters flow past deep-red canyon walls. The remote area is incredibly picturesque, and home to indigenous sacred sites that have largely been spared from tourist traffic and industrial development. [[5]](#footnote-6)5This location, just upstream from Grand Canyon National Park, may become home to the LCR Project. [[6]](#footnote-7)6The proposed pumped-storage hydroelectric facility, capable of producing up to 1,500 megawatts of energy, could potentially supply much-needed renewable energy as antiquated forms of generation, like coal, steadily **[\*44]**decline. However, the site of the proposed project would both flood indigenous sacred sites upstream while making other private cultural areas more accessible to tourists, disrupting sacred practices, and potentially increasing instances of vandalism and destruction. [[7]](#footnote-8)7As such, tribes like the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe oppose the project. In addition to the destruction of cultural resources, damming the Little ***Colorado*** ***River*** would create significant environmental and ecological harms. [[8]](#footnote-9)8Because of these conflicting interests, the LCR Project presents a modern iteration of an ongoing resource management problem on the ***Colorado*** Plateau: the tension between unfettered economic development and preventing environmental and sociocultural harms.

As American states and municipalities increasingly support a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy resources, electric utilities and developers must come up with solutions to meet existing electricity demand with new sources of clean energy. The ***Colorado*** Plateau, a region the Southwest has historically relied upon for power production, contains ample resources to aid in the transition to clean energy. Hydropower represents a particularly controversial source of "clean" energy in the region. This energy source, capable of supplying dependable electricity with hardly any carbon emissions, has a troubling history of environmental harms and blatant disregard for local tribal sovereignty. The recent LCR Project proposal has reignited these tensions, pitting clean energy creation against other environmental and cultural concerns. This Note will investigate how modern laws and policies surrounding hydropower development, environmental stewardship, and cultural resource protections help or hinder hydropower's role in producing clean energy on the ***Colorado*** Plateau. While new laws may attempt to speed up hydropower licensing to facilitate new projects on the Plateau, the development of modern law as a whole overwhelmingly signals the end of rampant dam-building in the United States. Therefore, shortsighted hydropower proposals such as the LCR Project are most likely doomed from the start.

**[\*45]**

I. The Evolution of Hydropower on the ***Colorado*** Plateau

This Part will explore the mechanics of hydropower, how its presence on the ***Colorado*** Plateau developed, and how that energy is often exported to other regions. This Part will also address how recent pieces of federal legislation are seeking to facilitate the next step in hydropower's evolution on the Plateau.

*A. Hydropower and the Development of Pumped Storage*

Hydropower involves harnessing the kinetic energy of flowing water to create electricity. [[9]](#footnote-10)9Because of the closed-loop nature of the Earth's hydrologic cycle, and the lack of greenhouse gas emissions and effluent pollution generally associated with the energy development process, hydropower is considered a renewable energy resource. [[10]](#footnote-11)10The basic technology behind hydropower was first used in the United States in the 1880s, and has since evolved into one of the most consistently dominant sources of renewable energy in the country. [[11]](#footnote-12)11Hydroelectric facilities are often built into dams with impoundment reservoirs behind them. [[12]](#footnote-13)12This conventional dam design allows for controlled releases of stored water to spin turbines within the dam, which transforms the kinetic energy of moving water into mechanical energy, thereby creating electricity. The ability to schedule long, controlled releases of water into the turbines means hydropower projects are capable of providing reliable energy while avoiding intermittency problems, which affect other forms of renewable energy. [[13]](#footnote-14)13

**[\*46]**Another type of hydroelectric facility, which is the kind being proposed on the Little ***Colorado***, is a pumped-storage plant. [[14]](#footnote-15)14The system uses two reservoirs, one at a higher elevation than the other. [[15]](#footnote-16)15When called upon to produce power, water is released from the higher elevation reservoir into the lower elevation reservoir, spinning turbines to create electricity. [[16]](#footnote-17)16When energy demand on the electricity system is low and the cost of power is cheap, the water from the lower reservoir is pumped back up into the higher-elevation reservoir to be used again when demand later increases. [[17]](#footnote-18)17Some pumped-storage facilities are "closed-loop," meaning that they transfer water between the upper and lower reservoir only. However, many facilities are built in an "open-loop" design, discharging water into ***river*** systems in order to ensure an adequate supply of water without permanently removing it from the larger hydrologic system. [[18]](#footnote-19)18The lower reservoir is then refilled by a dammed segment upstream on the same ***river***. As a result, pumped-storage projects often require damming ***rivers*** and tributaries.

**[\*47]** *Figure 1:*   *Displaying an open-loop pumped-storage hydropower project, akin to the plans for the LCR Project.* [[19]](#footnote-20)19

The LCR Project would employ this "open-loop" concept. The pumped-storage facility would be sited on Navajo Nation land near the confluence of the Little ***Colorado*** and ***Colorado*** ***Rivers***, just a half-mile from the border of Grand Canyon National Park. [[20]](#footnote-21)20A lower concrete dam would be installed a few miles above the confluence of the Little ***Colorado*** and ***Colorado*** ***Rivers*** to flood approximately 200 acres of canyon. [[21]](#footnote-22)21A second rockfill dam would sit on the rim above the canyon, creating the upper reservoir. [[22]](#footnote-23)22The lower dam would alter the hydrology of the ***river*** **[\*48]**just a few miles from the confluence, in turn affecting the ***Colorado*** ***River***'s downstream ecosystems and water users. [[23]](#footnote-24)23This highlights that dams, along with their associated reservoirs, are crucial components of hydropower generation. However, they carry with them many cultural and environmental concerns, which will be addressed later.

*Figure 2:*  *Figure 2: A map depicting the location of the proposed LCR Project on the Little* ***Colorado******River****, along with the additionally proposed Salt Trail Canyon Pumped Storage Project.* [[24]](#footnote-25)24

*B. History of Dam Construction on the Plateau*

Early homesteading laws shaped the development of hydropower on the ***Colorado*** Plateau. In 1877, Congress passed the Desert Land Act in an attempt to promote settlement of arid and semi-arid regions of the American West. [[25]](#footnote-26)25The Act allowed homesteaders to "reclaim" public land **[\*49]**so long as they constructed irrigation infrastructure to cultivate those lands. [[26]](#footnote-27)26This consequently led to an influx of settlement on or near the Plateau, with areas like Arizona's Salt ***River*** Valley, home to the Phoenix metropolitan area, and California's Imperial Valley seeing an increase of ranchers and farmers. [[27]](#footnote-28)27The population growth in these arid regions necessitated the development of infrastructure to retain and transport water to satisfy the needs of the newer inhabitants, particularly for irrigation. Once numerous government-sponsored surveys mapped the region's water resources and federal laws like the Desert Land Act were enacted, widespread dam development ensued to fulfill this purpose. [[28]](#footnote-29)28

Congress created the Bureau of Reclamation in 1902 through the Reclamation Act, a law which established federal funding structures for large-scale irrigation and flood control projects on ***rivers*** and waterbodies across the country. [[29]](#footnote-30)29The agency found opportunity for projects on the Plateau, seeking to improve the storage and use of water to facilitate economic development in the arid West. [[30]](#footnote-31)30The Bureau's - and, by extension, the federal government's - involvement in the development of water infrastructure in the West channeled federal money into dam construction projects, storing huge amounts of water behind concrete barriers so that the government could ensure homesteaders had a constant, dependable water supply.

While many of these dams primarily served the purpose of supplying water for irrigation, rapid population growth in areas near the Plateau during the twentieth century created the need for dams to serve a second purpose. To meet growing electricity demand, the Bureau of Reclamation began selecting sites for hydropower development. Black Canyon was one such location, and became the site of Hoover Dam. [[31]](#footnote-32)31The site was initially staked for dam development when Congress passed the Boulder Canyon Act in 1928 (Boulder Canyon being another name for Black Canyon). [[32]](#footnote-33)32Around that same time, the economic stimulus created by the New Deal channeled millions more federal dollars into hydroelectricity projects. [[33]](#footnote-34)33 **[\*50]**This combined promise of money and labor allowed a conglomerate of companies to propose the largest concrete structure ever built at the time. Hoover Dam, the monolithic icon of the dam construction era, was opened for operation on the ***Colorado*** ***River*** along the Arizona-Nevada border in 1937. [[34]](#footnote-35)34The hydroelectric facility still creates energy to this day, serving up to 1.3 million people in Nevada, Arizona, and California. [[35]](#footnote-36)35

The success of the Boulder Canyon Project helped trigger a cascade of dam and hydropower development until the early 1970s. [[36]](#footnote-37)36Today, all projects on the Plateau, including Glen Canyon Dam and the accompanying Lake Powell, combine to store five times the amount of water usually furnished by the previously free-flowing ***Colorado*** ***River***. [[37]](#footnote-38)37Throwing support behind hydropower development, Congress passed the ***Colorado*** ***River*** Basin Project Act in 1968, which in part encouraged retrofitting existing dams with hydropower-generation equipment. [[38]](#footnote-39)38As a result, projects constructed across the country during the twentieth century tripled the United States' hydropower output, which soon provided for forty percent of electric use nation-wide. [[39]](#footnote-40)39

Undoubtedly, this federally sanctioned buildup of dams and hydropower generation took full advantage of ***Colorado*** Plateau water resources. In total, there are now fourteen large dams on the ***Colorado*** ***River***'s main stem, and dozens of others throughout the ***river*** basin's tributaries. [[40]](#footnote-41)40The hydropower generation from these facilities creates enough power to provide over 4,200 megawatts of electricity with ***Colorado*** Plateau water, enough for fifteen million people in the region. [[41]](#footnote-42)41

*C. Shipping Resources Off the Plateau: Phoenix as an Example*

It would be an understatement to say that dams on the ***Colorado*** Plateau are crucial components for reliable irrigation, flood control, and electricity in nearby communities as they are structured today. But rather than primarily serving Plateau communities and interests, private and public enterprisers have promoted a net-exportation of these resources to outside metropolises. The City of Phoenix exists as a prominent example **[\*51]**of Plateau hydropower benefitting outside communities. Due to its pleasant climate and striking scenery, businessmen, investors, and politicians sought to transform the area from a struggling agricultural town to a bustling urban center capable of attracting business, industry, and homeowners. [[42]](#footnote-43)42With federal support and savvy politicking, this vision was well underway towards the latter half of the twentieth century. [[43]](#footnote-44)43But the rapid growth of the city mandated a significant increase in power supply.

To keep the skyline free of unsightly power stations and harmful pollutants, Phoenix leaders worked with utility companies and power providers to secure transmission of energy generation from the ***Colorado*** Plateau, hundreds of miles away. [[44]](#footnote-45)44Though these efforts required connection and construction of coal plants, they facilitated substantial hydropower development as well. [[45]](#footnote-46)45Numerous dams were constructed and fitted with turbines to provide hydroelectricity to Arizona's quickly growing urban centers. The push for a bigger Phoenix motivated Arizona legislators to rigorously voice their support for the construction of hydropower projects in the 1960s, which, upon construction, would supply additional electricity to the rapidly growing city. [[46]](#footnote-47)46

Political support for these projects continuously realized impactful results, and Arizona's hydropower generation continued to expand in the latter half of the twentieth century. According to 2018 data, almost half of Arizona's total renewable generation comes from hydropower. [[47]](#footnote-48)47Plateau dams such as Hoover and Glen Canyon provide large amounts of electricity, which is then transported to major urban areas. [[48]](#footnote-49)48Using the development of Phoenix as an example, it is obvious that electricity generated from ***Colorado*** ***River*** and tributary dams provide substantial amounts of power to regions outside the Plateau. Clearly, hydropower is a crucial component of the current renewable energy mix of Plateau states. This is an important factor to consider when contemplating the need for inclusion of hydropower generation in a shift to renewables on the ***Colorado*** Plateau.

**[\*52]**

*D. Modern Policies for Dam and Hydropower Construction*

Over half of the ***Colorado*** Plateau is public land, and as such, any hydropower project sited there would likely have to deal with various levels of federal oversight. [[49]](#footnote-50)49Despite a winding down of major projects after the 1960s, federal support for hydropower is experiencing a resurgence in the twenty-first century. In the 2017-2018 federal legislative session, for example, several western legislators made concerted pushes for increased hydropower development in their states. In 2017, Republican Representative Tom McClintock of California introduced the Water Supply Permitting Coordination Act. [[50]](#footnote-51)50Garnering the support of other western legislators from Arizona and ***Colorado***, the bill's main purpose was to speed up approvals and environmental analyses for new dam construction, with the hope of creating more water security and hydropower development in the West. [[51]](#footnote-52)51The Act would have essentially exempted dams from most environmental laws, limiting environmental review to only one year. [[52]](#footnote-53)52Despite ardent protests from environmentalists, regulators, and water law experts, [[53]](#footnote-54)53the bill passed the House later in 2017. [[54]](#footnote-55)54However, the Senate never sent the bill to committee, and thus it died during the legislative session.

Nonetheless, other dam and hydropower legislation managed to proceed to the president's desk. In 2018, Congress passed the America's Water Infrastructure Act. [[55]](#footnote-56)55Among other things, the Act requires the Army Corps of Engineers to assess and develop a list of nonpowered dams across the country which have the greatest potential for hydropower generation. [[56]](#footnote-57)56Additionally, the law mandates that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission ("FERC") expedite licensing procedures to install and operate hydropower facilities in existing dams. [[57]](#footnote-58)57Thus, this law seeks to **[\*53]**speed up the rate of hydropower development across the country.

For environmentalists, Congressional promotion and expedition of hydropower development could be a positive sign in a push to a more renewable future. However, current and future dam projects present environmental and cultural concerns such as loss of species habitat and destruction of cultural sites. [[58]](#footnote-59)58Consequently, critics of dams may point out that the Water Infrastructure Act does not seem to present an opportunity to tackle these problems and, more broadly, reassess whether some dams need to exist in the first place. Furthermore, the law does not improve protections for environmental and sociocultural concerns, which often plague existing dams. Whether failed or signed into law, these pieces of legislation show that support for dam construction and hydropower is still alive among lawmakers in southwestern states. These policy ideals promote expedited licensing and construction, risking a repeat of the harms of rampant dam-building that scarred the Plateau in the past.

*E. The Result of Renewed Federal Support for Dams*

Regardless of these concerns, the renewed federal push for hydropower development has inspired various organizations to pursue hydropower projects on the ***Colorado*** Plateau. In addition to the LCR Project, there are several other pumped-storage facility proposals. Pumped Hydro Storage LLC, the same company hoping to build the LCR Project, also proposed a facility just upstream of Salt Trail Canyon in Arizona. [[59]](#footnote-60)59This area, within the Navajo Nation and along the Little ***Colorado*** ***River***, holds significant cultural value to both the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe; the Hopi's Salt Trail has been used for centuries to collect salt and perform rituals deep within the Grand Canyon. [[60]](#footnote-61)60The surrounding areas, once kept relatively private for Hopi cultural use, would be flooded with workers and vehicles to construct the two large concrete dams. Eventually, water from the lower reservoir would flood this sacred area too. [[61]](#footnote-62)61

The largest project proposed on the Plateau thus far is Daybreak Power's Navajo Energy Storage Station ("NESS"), to be located on **[\*54]**Navajo Nation near the south shore of Lake Powell. [[62]](#footnote-63)62The massive pumped-storage facility, estimated to cost $ 3.8 billion, would have the capacity to generate 2.2 gigawatts of power. [[63]](#footnote-64)63Federal laws like America's Water Infrastructure Act are clearly renewing interest in hydropower development on the Plateau. However, despite FERC's accelerated licensing procedures, breaking ground for construction is still several years off, assuming subsequent licenses even get approved. [[64]](#footnote-65)64Ultimately, these project proposals show that, due in large part to federal encouragement, unfettered dam and hydropower development continuously looms as a threat to cultural and environmental interests on the Plateau.

II. Hydropower as an Ally in the Shift to Clean Power

This Part will discuss the motivations for a shift to clean power on the Plateau, along with hydropower's potential to contribute to that change.

*A. Coal Generation and the Harms of the "Big Buildup"*

To increase electricity generation capacity beyond what hydropower facilities could supply, coal-fired power plants began to sprout up throughout the region starting in the 1960s. [[65]](#footnote-66)65Long power lines, spanning hundreds of miles, transported the energy created by the coal plants to rapidly expanding cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, and Denver. [[66]](#footnote-67)66These cities demanded more electricity, which led to a "big buildup" of energy generation on the Plateau. [[67]](#footnote-68)67However, this "big buildup" was also characterized by the inequities faced by Plateau communities, namely tribes. National and international **[\*55]**corporations opened mines to exploit Plateau coal. These worksites primarily employed Navajo and Hopi people and opened gaping mines on their reservations. [[68]](#footnote-69)68As a result of proximity to these operations, tribes have been exposed to the vast majority of the coal industry's environmental and health impacts on the Plateau, including air pollution, water pollution, poor access to healthcare, and a lopsided economic dependence on the root cause of these harms. [[69]](#footnote-70)69These wrongdoings became contributing factors for a push by many tribal communities to remove coal production from their lands, and by extension, off the Plateau. [[70]](#footnote-71)70They also contribute to the continued local skepticism of energy projects, and their uneven benefits to far-away cities at the expense of Plateau communities. Tribes have historically borne the brunt of the environmental and health impacts of energy development with little economic benefit. The LCR Proposal therefore faces an uphill battle in proving to Plateau communities that the project would not repeat past inequities.

*B. Decommissioning Coal and the Shift to Renewable Energy*

In recent decades, as a result of these social and environmental concerns, as well as the decreasing financial viability of coal power in general, utility companies and power providers have begun to decommission coal power plants. For example, the Navajo Generating Station, the largest coal plant on the Plateau, closed its doors in 2019. [[71]](#footnote-72)71The plant could produce over 2,000 megawatts at full capacity and was an important contributor to electricity demand in Phoenix, Tucson, and Las Vegas. [[72]](#footnote-73)72Cheaper energy sources, including natural gas and solar power, as well as aging technologies and equipment within the plant, were factors that doomed its continued operation. [[73]](#footnote-74)73With coal generation steadily decreasing thanks to high cost, other plants on the Plateau have met the **[\*56]**same fate as the Navajo Generating Station. [[74]](#footnote-75)74All but a handful of the fifty-one coal plants on or within fifty miles of the ***Colorado*** Plateau's geographic area have set closure dates. [[75]](#footnote-76)75

In line with the coal plants shutting down, states in and around the Plateau are pursuing their own renewable energy plans. For example, Arizona, which has historically fulfilled a significant portion of its energy needs through coal power, [[76]](#footnote-77)76has committed to fulfilling fifteen percent of its statewide energy needs through renewables by 2024, mentioning hydropower facilities as potentially eligible renewable sources. [[77]](#footnote-78)77New Mexico, another state whose borders overlap with the Plateau, plans to reach a more ambitious forty percent renewables load by 2025, including hydropower as a part of the mix. [[78]](#footnote-79)78These goals rely on and catalyze significant renewable generation increases in the region, and both contemplate the continued use of hydropower to meet their respective targets.

*C. The LCR Project and "Clean" Pumped Hydropower*

As a result of the "big buildup," cities that surround the Plateau continue to rely on its energy generation; as a result, the region will continue to be seen as attractive real estate for projects that meet the demand for additional renewable energy development. Developer Steve Irwin and his company, Pumped Hydro Storage, evidently see the Plateau this way, hoping to use the LCR Project to meet growing renewable energy demands in the Southwest. FERC introduced this proposal in the federal register in September of 2019, [[79]](#footnote-80)79where Pumped Hydro Storage estimated the cost of the project to be $ 6 billion. [[80]](#footnote-81)80After a commenting period, FERC **[\*57]**approved a license to allow Pumped Hydro Storage to complete an in-depth feasibility study. [[81]](#footnote-82)81The study will cost several million dollars and take multiple years to complete. This stage of the permitting process will bring environmental and social concerns to the forefront. However, it is unknown how much of an impact those concerns may have on how the project moves forward.

The supposed benefits of the LCR Project echo similar promises once made by other hydropower and coal proposals. Irwin has touted the facility as providing benefits not only for large southwestern communities, but also for those living on the Plateau. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Irwin explained that the LCR Project could bring paved roads, potable water, and clean electricity to tribal communities, along with easier access to the Little ***Colorado*** for recreation. [[82]](#footnote-83)82Irwin believes that these benefits would boost the Navajo Nation's economy, bringing jobs and investment to the Nation. [[83]](#footnote-84)83Furthermore, the pumped-storage facility would supply an average of 8,500 gigawatts of clean, renewable power per year. [[84]](#footnote-85)84As a comparison, the recently closed Navajo Generating Station was producing approximately 13,000 gigawatts per year. [[85]](#footnote-86)85The LCR Project, combined with other proposals like NESS and the Salt Trail Canyon facility, could provide energy to make up for closing coal plants around the Plateau. If Irwin's assertions are true, his project would help meet clean energy goals set by Plateau states while improving local economies.

III. Environmental Impacts OF Plateau Hydropower

Though it is worth acknowledging ***Colorado*** Plateau dams and their importance in providing water and energy to people in the region, it is equally important to note the environmental impacts that stem from impeding a ***river***'s flow with countless tons of concrete. This Part will explore the environmental consequences of hydropower projects and how federal law evolved to account for those impacts.

**[\*58]**

*A. Environmental Impacts*

The era of excessive dam-building, spanning from the early 1900s to the 1960s, predated many environmental laws in the United States, including the Clean Water Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Consequently, twentieth century Plateau dam development - and accompanying hydropower projects - proceeded largely ignorant of their environmental impacts. [[86]](#footnote-87)86But as the federal government became more cognizant of the ecological and climatic consequences of industrialization, and as public sentiment spurred the environmental movement, the perceptions of dams began to change. Shining examples of man's ability to tame and harness ***rivers*** increasingly became seen as brutalist impediments to nature in the eyes of the general public and environmental experts alike.

Multiple studies on water storage projects on the ***Colorado*** Plateau have shed light on the environmental impacts of dams. Dams along the ***Colorado*** ***River*** trap silt from the streamflow behind their concrete walls, where it settles to the bottom of reservoirs. The water that flows from the dam is clearer, which may be more aesthetically pleasing, but has real consequences for the downstream ecosystem. The lack of sediment results in lower deposits on the banks of the ***Colorado*** ***River***, which rapidly increases the rate of riparian zone erosion. [[87]](#footnote-88)87Riparian zone erosion can affect nutrient cycling, vegetation growth, and flood events. [[88]](#footnote-89)88Furthermore, many native fish species in the ***Colorado*** ***River*** depend on the formation of sandbars, ***river*** banks, and the calmer off-channel pools for breeding, all of which are created by these deposits. [[89]](#footnote-90)89Sediment also carries nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous, which are crucial to ecological processes downstream. [[90]](#footnote-91)90Because dams have reduced the ***Colorado*** ***River***'s sediment transport by ninety percent, this problem **[\*59]**creates concern over collapsing food chains and the longevity of native fisheries. [[91]](#footnote-92)91Therefore, sediment trapping in reservoirs can be harmful for Plateau riparian zones, leading to decreased vegetation, loss of species habitat, and higher rates of erosion.

The tangled web of infrastructure influencing the Plateau's hydrology has resulted in massive changes to its ecology. Because of shifts in sediment content, water temperature, and hydrological flows, many native and endemic species of fish struggle to persist. [[92]](#footnote-93)92Areas of the ***Colorado*** ***River*** Basin closer to the headwaters still have many native fish species, although several are now listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. [[93]](#footnote-94)93The Lower Basin - where states like Arizona, New Mexico, and California draw their water - has an almost entirely introduced fish population. [[94]](#footnote-95)94Different species of fish purposefully or accidentally introduced to the system by people are able to outcompete native species in the dammed ***river*** system because they are more resilient to human-induced changes in hydrology. [[95]](#footnote-96)95Fish whose lifecycles previously drove them through significant portions of the ***Colorado*** ***River*** system are now pinned between dams, suffocated by introduced species. Dams on the ***Colorado*** ***River*** have also flooded unique upstream ecosystems while drying out others downstream. [[96]](#footnote-97)96These projects have resulted in a loss to habitat, species, and ecosystem services, to a high degree.

Pumped-storage hydropower projects produce a host of similar environmental harms. Because "open-loop" iterations require constructing a dam to impound ***river*** water, they too contribute to the environmental problems discussed above. [[97]](#footnote-98)97There are additional unique problems created by pumped-storage projects. For one, the reservoirs and nearby ***rivers*** will experience rapid shifts in water level as water is captured or expended in the storage and power generation processes. This can be damaging to flora and fauna in riparian zones. [[98]](#footnote-99)98The constant and extreme fluctuations also disrupt sediment on the ***river*** or reservoir bottoms, which reduces visibility **[\*60]**in the water. [[99]](#footnote-100)99While conventional dams may provide infrastructure to facilitate ***river*** species bypassing impediments, the vertical nature of pumped-storage projects prevents this sort of mitigation. This migration barrier exists because if aquatic plants or animals are inadvertently sucked into the system and sent to a higher-or lower-elevation reservoir, there is no good way to return them against the flow to their original habitat. [[100]](#footnote-101)100This means that many "open-loop" pumped-storage projects risk increasing the species mortality in an already dammed ***river*** system. [[101]](#footnote-102)101

*B. Modern Environmental Laws and Hydropower*

These environmental harms were eventually noticed by policymakers, contributing to a slowing of dam development after the 1960s. As the environmental movement blossomed in the early 1970s, federal legislators passed a slew of environmental laws. These included the Endangered Species Act of 1973 ("ESA"), which forced dam developers and operators to consider and reduce impacts to endangered and threatened aquatic species. [[102]](#footnote-103)102If a dam were to jeopardize a listed species' continued existence, this law would have the teeth to stop a dam construction project altogether. [[103]](#footnote-104)103In addition to the ESA, laws like the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act, passed in 1969 and 1972 respectively, impose additional requirements on hydropower project planning and implementation. [[104]](#footnote-105)104These laws contributed to a slowing of dam development starting in the 1970s, as the marginal benefits derived from further damming ***river*** systems were weighed against stricter environmental protections. [[105]](#footnote-106)105In fact, despite new federal efforts to promote dam construction, many modern environmental policies surrounding dams require significant ***river*** restoration and impact mitigation, which complicates the cost and logistics of new project **[\*61]**proposals. [[106]](#footnote-107)106Due to FERC's involvement in hydropower development, these federal laws will apply to the agency, taking center stage in the LCR Project planning process. Therefore, FERC and Pumped Hydro Storage must consider alternative strategies that do not harm water quality, endangered species habitat, or other environmental factors. Consequently, modern hydropower projects deal with additional hurdles to development that their predecessors, such as Hoover or Glen Canyon Dam, did not have to work around.

*C. Hydropower and Resiliency to Climate Change*

While dams and hydropower facilities cause a host of environmental harms, their efficacy can be hamstrung by the environment itself. Climate change, resulting in increased drought on the ***Colorado*** Plateau, contributes to lower flows in the ***Colorado*** ***River***. [[107]](#footnote-108)107Concerns over frequent droughts impact many sectors of the economy, including hydropower generation. When reduced streamflow impacts the volume of water storage in a reservoir, there is less water available to satisfy water rights designated for electric generation. For example, power plant operators at Glen Canyon Dam are increasingly concerned about the decreasing water levels in Lake Powell. [[108]](#footnote-109)108If water levels fall below 3,487 feet, the amount of air intake accompanying the water feeding the dam's turbines can significantly damage the machinery. [[109]](#footnote-110)109Thus, the turbines become inoperable when the reservoir reaches a certain low-water level. In recent years, Lake Powell's water levels have come within just ninety-eight feet of that mark. [[110]](#footnote-111)110Pumped-storage projects would present similar issues when reservoir levels are too low to generate the facility's expected energy. With decreased snowpack in the mountains feeding the ***Colorado*** Basin, increased temperatures throughout the Plateau, and large withdrawals of ***Colorado*** ***River*** water for human use, climate change is a pressing concern regarding the potential efficiency and lifespan of newly **[\*62]**proposed hydropower projects.

The increasing cost of hydropower generation reflects the reality of this situation. Studies show that uncertainties surrounding generation during times of prolonged drought tend to increase overall hydropower operation costs. [[111]](#footnote-112)111The idea of relying on the ***Colorado*** ***River***'s streamflow for sufficient reservoir capacity to dependably operate hydropower projects, during relatively unpredictable long-term climatic shifts, creates a variation in operating costs that makes other forms of renewable generation - such as solar power - appear more stable and cost-effective. [[112]](#footnote-113)112This uncertainty, reflected in operating costs, could potentially make project developers think twice about the long-term viability of any proposed hydropower projects. Indeed, some studies posit that the costs of running hydropower facilities in dams on the Plateau are increasingly outweighing their benefits. [[113]](#footnote-114)113

IV. Sociocultural Impacts of Plateau Hydropower

On top of environmental impacts and growing uncertainty in the face of climate change, hydropower also presents issues of social and cultural concern to communities on the Plateau. Even before the installation of many of the large-scale hydropower projects in the region, general water resource management and regulation on the Plateau made a habit of neglecting tribal concerns. The ***Colorado*** ***River*** Compact of 1928, which contains congressionally approved water allocations for the several southwestern states vying for ***Colorado*** ***River*** water, did not reserve a place at the table for Indian tribes. [[114]](#footnote-115)114Subsequent enabling legislation that authorized many of the dam-building projects, including the 1928 Boulder Canyon Project Act, the 1948 Upper ***Colorado*** ***River*** Basin Compact Act, and the 1956 ***Colorado*** ***River*** Storage Project Act, similarly failed to account for socioeconomic and cultural detriments water projects would have on Plateau tribes. [[115]](#footnote-116)115It is true that, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, many Bureau of Reclamation projects on the Plateau had tribal economic uplift in mind. However, dam and hydropower **[\*63]**projects went forward with little regard for potential cultural, religious, or economic impacts.

*A. Historical Lack of Legal Support for Sociocultural Concerns: The Glen Canyon Dam Example*

Although many federally recognized tribes call the ***Colorado*** Plateau home, this Note will focus mainly on the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe, as their lands and resources are most affected by the proposed LCR Project. During the dam construction era, Navajo reservation lands and cultural resources often stood in the Bureau of Reclamation's way. Glen Canyon Dam, for example, was sited squarely in Navajo lands. [[116]](#footnote-117)116Congress authorized construction for the dam in 1956 to provide water storage and hydropower for Lower Basin states, as well as recreation opportunities in the new Lake Powell. [[117]](#footnote-118)117Representatives of the Navajo Nation were originally in support of the dam for its irrigation and electricity potential. [[118]](#footnote-119)118As such, Navajo Nation representatives and the Bureau of Reclamation entered into an agreement to exchange land necessary to construct and operate the dam. [[119]](#footnote-120)119However, the Bureau arguably downplayed the negative impact Glen Canyon Dam would have on Navajo Nation. [[120]](#footnote-121)120For one, environmental impacts such as sediment trapping and lower water flow altered ecologies and hydrology upstream and downstream in ways not initially made known to the Navajo Nation. [[121]](#footnote-122)121Additionally, Lake Powell presented unforeseen impacts on areas of spiritual and cultural significance.

The Navajo Nation's eventual objection to Glen Canyon Dam may be difficult for European-American politicians, dam proponents, and southwestern inhabitants to conceive. Although the dam did not flood any infrastructure or communities, the waters of Lake Powell instead **[\*64]**inundated areas of place-based spiritual significance. [[122]](#footnote-123)122To the Navajo, the ***Colorado*** ***River*** exists as a free-flowing, sacred entity. [[123]](#footnote-124)123Ceremonies often include visiting certain riparian sacred sites to make offerings to the ***River***. [[124]](#footnote-125)124Rainbow Bridge was one such ill-fated sacred site. [[125]](#footnote-126)125The Navajo used the natural rock arch, which spanned the ***Colorado*** ***River***, as a site for ***river*** offerings and other religious ceremonies. [[126]](#footnote-127)126For centuries, it was considered a remote location, and the Navajo were able to retain Rainbow Bridge as a relatively private sacred site despite increasing incursion from European-American settlers. Upon the completion of Glen Canyon Dam in 1966, the water level of Lake Powell began to rise, facilitating access to Rainbow Bridge for recreationists. [[127]](#footnote-128)127As a result, the number of non-indigenous visitors to Rainbow Bridge skyrocketed. [[128]](#footnote-129)128Tens of thousands of tourists began to visit the now designated national monument per year, [[129]](#footnote-130)129severely disrupting Navajo cultural practices. [[130]](#footnote-131)130Eventually, this disruption pushed the Navajo Nation to challenge the operation of the Glen Canyon Dam in court.

The unexpected inundation of sacred sites caused by the expanding Lake Powell pushed the Navajo Nation to sue the Bureau of Reclamation to limit the water body's growth. In *Badoni v. Higginson*, the Navajo Nation argued that the flooding of sacred sites and increased tourism, resulting from the operation of Glen Canyon Dam, violated their First Amendment rights to freely practice religion. [[131]](#footnote-132)131In a shockingly apathetic decision, the Utah District Court chose to balance "the existence of a bona fide, sincere religious claim" with "the nature of the state interests" in recreational and economic opportunities. [[132]](#footnote-133)132The court determined that the state interest in recreational opportunities presented by Lake Powell, along **[\*65]**with the irrigation water and electricity supplied by Glen Canyon Dam, outweighed the Navajo Nation's religious preservation arguments. [[133]](#footnote-134)133 *Badoni* essentially condoned the flooding of cultural sites by water and tourism, setting the precedent that economic benefits, such as hydropower, outweigh the religious and cultural importance of geographic features on the ***Colorado*** Plateau.

V. Attempting to Recognize Sociocultural Impacts of Hydropower in the Law

This Part will explore legal and regulatory efforts to better mitigate sociocultural impacts of hydropower development to tribal communities on the Plateau. The efficacy of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, along with FERC regulations for tribal consultation, show that many legal structures related to solving sociocultural inequities in hydropower development fail to live up to the task.

*A. Legislation: The American Indian Religious Freedom Act*

Soon after the Rainbow Bridge controversy, Congress finally passed legislation which offered at least somewhat better recognition of tribal cultural concerns regarding federal land development. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 ("AIRFA") led the way among those new laws. [[134]](#footnote-135)134Congress stated that "it shall be the policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions" of their culture. [[135]](#footnote-136)135This included protecting "access to sacred sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rights." [[136]](#footnote-137)136In pursuit of this goal, Congress effectively required agencies to reduce and eliminate interference with the free exercise of indigenous religious practices. [[137]](#footnote-138)137

While this law should have ended federally sanctioned impediments to tribal sacred sites, courts interpreted the Act as more of a hollow sentiment than a legally enforceable set of rules. On appeal, the Tenth Circuit affirmed the Utah District Court's decision in *Badoni* in 1980, **[\*66]**essentially gutting AIRFA. [[138]](#footnote-139)138Unfortunately, the Navajo Nation had initially hoped AIRFA would give them more of a say in the operation of Glen Canyon Dam and the management of sacred sites turned public parks like Rainbow Bridge. [[139]](#footnote-140)139

The Supreme Court decision in *Lyng* *v. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association* made matters worse. There, the highest court in the land addressed the issue of whether AIRFA could be used to prevent the Forest Service from permitting timber harvesting in a national forest in northwestern California. [[140]](#footnote-141)140This area, called the High Country, was sacred land to the Yurok, Karuk, and Tolowa Tribes. Writing for the Court, Justice O'Connor explained that the federal government could not make exceptions in its behavior for individuals due to religious interests. [[141]](#footnote-142)141Consequently, AIRFA was deemed to have no legally enforceable provisions. [[142]](#footnote-143)142Though Congress later stepped in to convert the area of national forest to a wilderness area, thus preventing the logging venture, the Supreme Court decision severely limited AIRFA's use in defense of indigenous sacred sites from federally sanctioned resource extraction projects. In the wake of this decision, courts have generally construed AIRFA to mean that agencies must consider impacts to tribal cultural resources, but do not necessarily have to do anything about it. [[143]](#footnote-144)143

*B. Regulation: FERC's Consultation Requirements*

In an effort to remediate the fallout from the Supreme Court's decision over AIRFA-based claims, President Bill Clinton signed an executive order in 1994, which stated that "each agency shall consult, to the greatest extent practicable and to the extent permitted by law, with tribal governments prior to taking actions that affect federally recognized tribal governments." [[144]](#footnote-145)144While this language proliferated a slew of agency rules outlining their consultation requirements, the varied nature of agency rules has left many tribes confused as to what level of consultation they can expect from any agency, and how much their opinions will even **[\*67]**matter. [[145]](#footnote-146)145

As the agency responsible for licensing hydropower projects, it is worth examining FERC's tribal consultation policies. In response to Clinton's executive order, FERC began rule making for its consultation policy, which concluded in 2003. Fortunately, several tribal entities - who checked the Federal Register at the right time - commented during rule-making proceedings, narrowly avoiding the poetic irony of creating a tribal consultation requirement without any tribal consultation. [[146]](#footnote-147)146In the final regulation, dubbed the "Policy Statement on Consultation with Indian Tribes in Commission Proceedings," FERC acknowledged its responsibility as a governmental entity to "adhere to certain fiduciary standards in its dealings with Indian tribes." [[147]](#footnote-148)147In order to "adhere" to its "fiduciary standards," the agency employs rather vague language in stating that it will "endeavor to work with tribes." [[148]](#footnote-149)148Recognizing its function as a quasi-judicial body in charge of granting permits for energy-related development projects, FERC's use of the word "endeavor," makes it clear that the agency seeks to balance interests, which can mean pitting tribal concerns against proponents of energy development. This could be a reason behind FERC's vague consultation language, which allows the agency to incorporate more input from affected tribes, while reserving itself discretion on how much weight to afford that input.

*C. Concerns with FERC's Consultation Policy*

In the recent past, FERC has shown its propensity to take tribal consultation lightly. In addition to licensing hydropower projects, the agency also approves pipeline siting and construction. In the siting discussions for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline in North Carolina, for example, FERC issued a decision in its draft environmental impact statement ("EIS") concluding that the proposed pipeline route did not disproportionately affect any marginalized communities. [[149]](#footnote-150)149However, members of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina responded, pointing out that the pipeline would impact 30,000 Native Americans, which was **[\*68]**misrepresented in the draft EIS. [[150]](#footnote-151)150Only after backlash erupted from this revelation did FERC initiate meaningful consultation procedures with the Lumbee Tribe. [[151]](#footnote-152)151Construction of the pipeline has not yet begun as of the writing of this Note; thanks to opposition from the Lumbee Tribe. Regardless of the consultation proceedings FERC has put in place, the project has had permits approved every step of the way. [[152]](#footnote-153)152FERC's policy is by no means a shining example of tribal consultation policy, but rather a small step in the right direction given past injustices to tribes and the use of their lands and sacred areas. [[153]](#footnote-154)153This example demonstrates that although FERC's consultation policy provides tribes with opportunities to express their opinions on energy development projects, it does not ensure that their opinions will manufacture beneficial results for indigenous interests.

*D. Analyzing Current Consultation Structures*

Though this analysis of tribal consultation is not nearly comprehensive in nature, these histories and laws highlight the fact that licensing hydropower generation on both federal and tribal land creates conflict around the preservation of tribal cultural sites. Despite a multitude of federal laws and regulations to mandate tribal consultation in development projects, there seems to be a continued *Badoni*-like balancing of the public benefits of resource use with indigenous concerns. [[154]](#footnote-155)154Agency consultation requirements do not always require actual changes to project development, as evidenced by a Government Accountability Office report from 2019. [[155]](#footnote-156)155This insidious fact regarding decision-making often renders "consultation" an ill-defined term with uncertain benefits for tribes. [[156]](#footnote-157)156Furthermore, agencies are mostly required to include consultation procedures not because of federal law, but due to presidential executive orders. As a result, consultation provisions stand on shaky ground and have the potential to change between presidential administrations. This ambiguity surrounding consultation applies to FERC's licensing and **[\*69]**hydropower development powers, which has led many scholars to consider hydropower to be a similarly controversial and harmful energy source to the Navajo Nation as coal and uranium development. [[157]](#footnote-158)157These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that the Federal Power Act gives FERC near-unlimited authority to site and approve hydropower projects on federal reservations, including Indian reservations. [[158]](#footnote-159)158Therefore, regardless of whether a hydropower project is proposed on an Indian reservation or adjacent federal land, FERC's uncertain and weak consultation policy is the only safeguard for a tribe to assert its concerns. It is imperative that, if energy generation on the Plateau trends towards increased hydropower development, tribes like the Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe have an important seat at the decision-making table so that previous wrongs from the dam-building era are not replicated.

VI. The LCR Project Revisited

With the environmental and sociocultural impacts of Plateau hydropower development in mind, this Part will return to the LCR Project, analyzing whether the proposal so far adheres to modern policies and regulations that are geared towards preventing repetition of past harms.

*A. Potential Harms of the Project*

The several potential benefits of the LCR Project remain speculative and are eclipsed by the near-certain harms associated with it. Because the project necessitates dam construction on the Little ***Colorado***, it will contribute to riparian zone erosion, habitat destruction, water quality reduction, and species loss common to all dams. [[159]](#footnote-160)159Specific to this project, these harms would impact habitat for the Humpback Chub, an endangered fish species native to this stretch of the Little ***Colorado***. [[160]](#footnote-161)160The Humpback Chub uses segments of the Little ***Colorado*** near the confluence as its spawning grounds because the ***Colorado*** ***River***, where it spends more of its adult life, has generally lower water temperatures. [[161]](#footnote-162)161Due to changes in the hydrology of the region, the Humpback Chub was listed as endangered **[\*70]**in 1967, a designation which remains to this day. [[162]](#footnote-163)162Because the LCR Project would severely alter its critical habitat in the Little ***Colorado*** ***River***, Pumped Hydro Storage would have to undergo consultation procedures with the Fish and Wildlife Service, pursuant to the ESA. [[163]](#footnote-164)163The Fish and Wildlife Service may list out mitigation procedures or make a finding that there is no project alternative that would not further jeopardize the species. [[164]](#footnote-165)164Given the strength of the ESA, this environmental harm alone could therefore be a major obstacle in the development of the project. [[165]](#footnote-166)165

*B. Community Response*

Response from the Hopi Tribe, Navajo Nation, and environmental groups has been overwhelmingly negative. This is largely due to the potential destruction of sacred sites and tribal land by the LCR Project reservoir. The proposed lower dam would flood several miles of canyon, including one of the most important sacred spaces in Hopi religion. [[166]](#footnote-167)166This sacred space called Sipapu, or "The Place of Emergence," is the area where the Hopi believe man first emerged into this world. [[167]](#footnote-168)167In this spot within Marble Canyon, near the confluence of the Little ***Colorado*** and ***Colorado*** ***Rivers***, it is believed that man was first taught to respect Mother Earth. [[168]](#footnote-169)168As a result, the Hopi maintain a stewardship role over the Grand Canyon area and its cultural sites. It is relentlessly ironic that the area could soon be flooded in an attempt to choke and manipulate the earth's resources for short-term gain. As a result of this, and other harms to cultural resources, the Hopi have expressed their disapproval of the LCR Project to FERC. [[169]](#footnote-170)169

In line with the Hopi, several chapters of the Navajo Nation have condemned the proposed hydropower facility. [[170]](#footnote-171)170Like the Hopi, the Navajo have similar stewardship and cultural ties to the Grand Canyon. **[\*71]**Further, the federal government and private developers have a history of making empty promises to the Navajo Nation regarding energy generation. [[171]](#footnote-172)171Some residents feel as though similar promises of energy and economic development were made to justify the construction of Navajo Generating Station and Glen Canyon Dam. [[172]](#footnote-173)172But in line with past federal development projects, energy was instead shipped to cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas while Navajo Nation communities dealt with harsh job conditions, pollution, and few of the benefits. [[173]](#footnote-174)173Pressure from residents has driven Jonathan Nez, president of the Navajo Nation, to issue formal letters opposing the LCR Project. [[174]](#footnote-175)174

In filing its proposal with FERC, Pumped Hydro Storage made no attempt to confer with affected groups, such as Navajo Nation and Hopi Tribe communities, about the logistics of the project. [[175]](#footnote-176)175In fact, Clark Tenakhongva, the Vice Chairman of the Hopi Tribe, was not made aware of the LCR Project proposal until he read about it on social media. [[176]](#footnote-177)176The Navajo Nation was not alerted to the proposal, sited on their own land, until members of the Grand Canyon Trust reached out to inform them. [[177]](#footnote-178)177This lack of communication is indicative of the dam-building era of the twentieth century, before better recognition of tribal sovereignty and indigenous roles were considered in resource development. Although FERC's tribal engagement procedures would kick in during subsequent licensing adjudications, this initial lack of transparency implies that Pumped Hydro Storage will be looking to expedite the project with the lowest amount of consultation required. Even at the outset of the project, given FERC's approval of a preliminary license to develop the project, this is surely at odds with the spirit of consultation measures set out in Clinton's executive order, FERC's own regulations, and numerous other laws. A long-lasting hydropower project that garners local support would obviously have to be done with tribal interests and concerns in mind. Without that support, the legal power of local opposition could work **[\*72]**against the LCR Project's potential success.

*C. Developing a Bigger Picture: Takeaways from the LCR Project Proposal*

The response to the LCR Project paints a broader picture of the outlook on Plateau hydropower moving forward. Despite modern policies to promote hydropower development, the era of unmitigated, largely unregulated, dam-building is over. Newer proposals like the LCR Project face an uphill battle against environmental protections, consultation requirements, climate change uncertainties, and the resulting higher project costs. More stakeholders, such as ecologists, environmental advocates, and tribal entities, are able to make their voices heard in agency adjudications and lawsuits. Greater stakeholder participation would force FERC at the very least to consider a wider array of consequences to hydropower development besides potential energy output. Yet in response to these well-voiced concerns, Steve Irwin chooses to reiterate that the steep canyon walls and rushing waters of Marble Canyon would make the site the perfect place for a hydropower project. [[178]](#footnote-179)178Time and time again, LCR Project developers show that their concerns over project viability extend only to blueprints, financial outlooks, and FERC licenses. Given the threat to endangered species, the disapproval from Navajo and Hopi governments, and the proximity to a national park, it seems unlikely that the LCR Project could continue to later phases of development. While the LCR Project may look good to an engineer on paper, it poses far too many cultural and environmental problems, and thus seems legally and ethically unlikely to succeed.

Conclusion: A Way Forward Without Hydropower?

It is clear that hydropower poses a variety of conflicting benefits and detriments to the ***Colorado*** Plateau. On the one hand, hydropower provides a carbon-free source of electricity, which southwestern communities increasingly depend on. It can help meet state renewable energy goals with baseload energy that can support intermittent wind and solar generation. However, given increasing drought due to climate change, severe **[\*73]**environmental impacts, and a history of ignoring cultural concerns, it seems that dams and their accompanying hydropower projects are becoming more socially and economically costly. It throws into question the necessity of even pursuing hydropower projects over developing wind, solar, and battery storage as ways to meet renewable energy goals and serve energy to Plateau and extra-Plateau customers.

Given the social and environmental impacts of dams and reservoirs, public perception of dams has changed significantly from the twentieth century. Hydropower production has been in decline since rampant dam-building slowed after the 1960s. [[179]](#footnote-180)179Electricity generated from these types of projects has decreased to around six percent of total energy consumption in the United States. [[180]](#footnote-181)180This is a substantial decrease from the forty percent during the mid-twentieth century. [[181]](#footnote-182)181Further, something often ignored about hydropower projects is that dams have a finite lifespan. [[182]](#footnote-183)182It is easy to question the reasoning behind putting up enormously expensive structures that will require even more funds to eventually break down. This is compounded by the host of environmental and social factors discussed above. This short-term strategy for energy development therefore makes little sense in a region where long-term water and energy planning is a necessity. Despite new laws to expedite licensing, the majority of existing environmental and tribal legislation reflects these major concerns with dam and hydropower development.

Other means of energy development are being lauded for their lower environmental impacts and community support on the Plateau. For example, prior to the Trump-era oil and gas licensing expansion policy, the Bureau of Land Management began supporting siting for wind and solar projects on the Plateau. [[183]](#footnote-184)183The Navajo Nation has also pursued other forms of renewable energy, helping to develop the Kayenta solar generation facility, creating energy used exclusively to power 36,000 Navajo homes. [[184]](#footnote-185)184These examples show that other forms of renewable energy development can be pursued without needing new and controversial hydropower projects.

**[\*74]**Hydropower does have the potential to provide dependable, base-load energy in communities shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy generation on the ***Colorado*** Plateau. However, proposals like the LCR Project highlight the fact that project developers and regulatory agencies still seem to ignore the well-understood environmental and social costs of these hydropower projects. The checkered history of hydropower production on the Plateau shows that the benefits of those projects are often enjoyed outside of the region while the harmful side effects remain behind. For these reasons, hydropower development is not the most culturally, environmentally, or financially viable form of renewable energy to pursue. If hydropower development makes a resurgence on the Plateau, and projects like NESS, Salt Canyon, and LCR continue into later stages of development, attention must be paid to these past histories of environmental and social harms. In all likelihood, the modern distaste for the impacts of dams may end up making new hydropower projects infeasible. In the interest of protecting indigenous cultural heritage, ecological resources, and long-term energy stability, this infeasibility may be for the best.

***Colorado*** Natural Resources, Energy & Environmental Law Review

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