Power down: Elwha dams' turbines silenced after decades
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PORT ANGELES — The Glines Canyon and Elwha dams have lost their reason for being.

After providing electricity to help Port Angeles and Port Townsend grow, the dams were cut off from the Bonneville Power Administration grid Wednesday in another step toward tearing them down.

Their four giant generators — three at Elwha Dam, one at Glines — were in almost continuous operation for nearly a century.

They generated vital power, but the dams west of Port Angeles, built without fish ladders, also destroyed a rich salmon run.

“Our objectives are real simple,” power plant supervisor Kevin Yancy said before setting out to neutralize the dams’ ability to create electrical power, as the Elwha Dam has done since 1913 and the Glines Canyon Dam since 1927.

“We want to shut down both dams and power plants, and we are going to reroute the current water running through the turbine generators over the spillway.”

As the turbines’ roar turned mute at Glines at 8:20 a.m. and Elwha at 9:19 a.m., the silence signaled the end of nearly a century of generating power — and a significant step toward tearing down the dams beginning in September and restoring the river’s fisheries.

Yancy signed the maintenance log in the Glines Canyon Dam power plant at 8:10 a.m. Wednesday, leading about a dozen reporters to a tiny desk before which stood a generator 18 feet across.

“K. Yancy on site to shut down Glines Canyon Power plant — Final Day of Operation!” he wrote.

“End of an era. Good by Glines.”

At 8:20, he wrote, “Main unit off-line!”

His entry at the Elwha Dam:

“Elwha P.H. [power house] Shut Down — Final.”

“Let bygones be bygones,” Yancy said as he separated the Elwha Dam’s transmission line from the Bonneville Power Administration grid.

“It’s the end of an era on the Elwha,” he added.

Robert Elofson, the Lower Elwha Klallam tribe’s director of river restoration, also was on-hand for the depowering of the Elwha Dam.

He saw the shutdown a little differently.

“When [Yancy] said ‘the end of an era,’ I was thinking more the return of another era for the river,” Elofson said.

“I am glad that this is the first step in taking the dams down. It’s a hard process to get here.”

Rendering the dams essentially useless, he added, “means a lot of hard effort has led to a result we wanted.”

Also in attendance was Olympic National Park Superintendent Karen Gustin.

“It’s a little more emotional than people expected,” she said.

“It’s the beginning of the beginning of another phase.”

In the next 30 to 45 days, hazardous fluids will be removed from machinery and the dams decommissioned.

Beginning in the next few weeks, the Lake Aldwell reservoir behind the 108-foot-tall Elwha Dam will be lowered, followed by the Lake Mills reservoir behind 210-foot-tall Glines Canyon Dam beginning late this month or in early July.

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The lakes' waters will shrink 18 feet down to the level of the dams' spill-gate sills in preparation for the dams being dismantled.

Barnard Construction Co. of Bozeman, Mont., will begin tearing down the dams Sept. 17 in a three-year $26.9 million contract with the National Park Service.

By then, Yancy and seven other federal Bureau of Reclamation workers who staff the dams and provide administrative support will have lost their jobs.

The Elwha watershed is in the national park, as is Glines Canyon Dam, while the Elwha Dam squats just 4.9 miles upstream from the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

The dams are being dismantled as part of the $327 million Elwha River Ecosystem and Fisheries Restoration Act in the largest removal of dams in the nation's history.

Between 21 million and 28 million cubic yards of sediment sit behind both dams combined, much of which is expected to coat the riverbed for marine habitat for five species of severely depleted salmon in a process never conducted in this magnitude.

Dam removal was set in motion in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when then-owner Crown Zellerbach sought to license the Elwha Dam and relicense the Glines Canyon Dam in applications to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The National Park Service challenged the energy commission's jurisdiction over the Glines Canyon Dam, which was absorbed into park boundaries in 1940, when the park expanded.

The Lower Elwha Klallam tribe called for dam removal and ecosystem restoration in 1986, and the energy regulatory commission's environmental study determined in 1991 that only dam removal would result in fisheries restoration.

That same study also determined that "the cost of power produced by the dam retention would equal or exceed the cost of power from the Bonneville Power Administration," according to a National Park Service fact sheet at http://tinyurl.com/3hvdrmt.

The Elwha River restoration act, signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1992, stayed the FERC license applications and called for "full restoration of the Elwha River ecosystem and native anadromous fisheries."

The dams generated an annual average output of 19 megawatts and produced up to 25 megawatts for the BPA grid.

That's a "tiny" amount compared with the more than 12,000 megawatts that run through the grid, BPA spokesman Doug Johnson said last week.

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