

Skagit – Seattle City Light Hydro Project

Between 1920 and 1953, three dams were built on the Skagit River in Washington State to provide power to the city of Seattle. Areas of the homeland of the Nlaka’pamux Nation were flooded by the creation of Ross Lake as part of the Skagit River Hydro Electric Project (“Project”). The Nlaka’pamux were not consulted on the Project when it was being constructed. The on-going operation of the Project continues to impact Nlaka’pamux cultural resources beyond the flooded area and will continue to do so into the future. The Project was re-licensed in 1995 and is due to be further re-licensed in 2025. The 2025 re-licensing process has begun.

In the United States, major hydro projects are relicensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and US laws recognize the rights of Indian Tribes to be involved and compensated.

The Nlaka’pamux are in a unique position in relation to the Project. The Nation is recognized as having an interest in the Skagit area but is not recognized as a “Tribe” in the USA. For this reason, NNTC sought and was granted intervenor status from FERC for the 1995 relicensing.

Nlaka’pamux connection to the lands beneath and surrounding Ross Lake date back thousands of years. Nlaka’pamux continue to come to this Valley for traditional harvests and events, but they come to a landscape that is vastly different.

As part of the 1995 re-licensing, Seattle City Light (SCL) entered into a settlement agreement with the Nlaka’pamux. This included funding for cultural survey work to cover costs to inventory, evaluate and determine the effect of the Project operations on traditional cultural properties in the Project area in the US. The inventory included archival review, informant interviews, and field visits. The study also recommended mitigation measures in and near the Project area. This work resulted in a substantial report which contains confidential information regarding site locations and was provided to Seattle City Light and other Nlaka’pamux in 2020.

A cooperative working relationship with the National Park Service (the Project is located in a National Park and Recreation area) and SCL is beneficial to protect Nlaka’pamux traditional cultural properties. Historic Property Management Plans are developed to assist with co-existence. Recreation activities in the Cascades Recreation Area where the Ross Lake dam is located, are greatly increased by the presence of Ross Lake. High use areas today are the same areas the Nlaka’pamux used. Both mitigation and protection are required to protect Nlaka’pamux interests.

Nlaka’pamux cultural survey work is continuing to be done in the Skagit by NNTC. The survey crew have faced very tough conditions to do this work and deserve recognition for their efforts. The most recent cultural survey work will help to inform the 2025 re-licensing of the Project. Elders from throughout the Nation have visited the Skagit together to provide their wisdom and further the understanding of Nlaka’pamux cultural heritage in the Skagit.

NNTC, on behalf of its membership, is participating in re-licensing discussions and studies for the 2025 licence renewal.