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Sept. 15, 2003 - County officials unhappy with SMUD

By JONATHAN SCHWARZBERG Staff writer

The effort to relicense the Sacramento Municipal Utilities District is heating up as El Dorado County officials are unsatisfied with SMUD's attempt at working together with the county.

El Dorado County Supervisor Jack Sweeney said SMUD is not following through on promises to work with the county on hammering out issues in a manner that would be beneficial to both parties.

"The more I deal with SMUD on this issue, the more I know how the original colonists felt: taxation without representation," Sweeney said.

Sweeney said the county was facing relicensing without representation. SMUD is in the process of relicensing the Upper American River Project with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The project will be granted a license for between 30 and 50 years.

SMUD's long-term federal license to operate a string of 10 power plants expires in 2007. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission requires the relicensing procedure to begin five years before the license expires and look at various aspects of the project.

But Sweeney said it looks like SMUD is trying to throw its weight around and create conditions favorable only to the utility and the county's neighbors to the west.

"It seems to me that the people in Sacramento are treating us as though we're one of their colonies and not their brother or sister," Sweeney said.

But a representative from SMUD said he thinks the process is going smoothly. David Hanson, SMUD's project manager, said he is satisfied with the progress at this time.

Hanson said the county is receiving many indirect benefits, including the recreational opportunities afforded by the project. He said rafting brings in a lot of money for El Dorado County that would otherwise be spent in other places.

"There's also a sign impact favor to the county by the workforce employed," Hanson said.

SMUD employs about 80 people at the work station at Fresh Pond. Hanson said contracts for maintenance and other areas stem from this station, adding money to the local community.

But Doug Leisz, representing Citizens for Water, said the socioeconomic studies fail to take into account everything. He said the only economic study to date has to do with recreation in the lower river.

"That's not enough," Leisz said. "We need there to be a full economic study of the impacts on the county, including road system plowing and access during the winter. And what about the cost to the sheriff's office for providing law enforcement and safety for additional attractions there?"

Leisz said Citizens for Water and other groups have brought these topics up with SMUD, but they are being virtually ignored.

"The licensing process is supposed to be a platform for discussing the issues and it's not happening," Leisz said. "When you look at the next license period and the place of origin and the fact that SMUD isn't working together, they've disenfranchised the county."

In a letter addressed to SMUD, Citizens for Water contends that the utility has only accepted El Dorado County issues dealing with river recreation, failing to look at water supplies, drought protection and other services.

But Hanson said water supplies and water rights are not dealt with in this process. Rather, he said the county needs to go before the State Water Resources Control Board to determine water rights.

"It's up to El Dorado County to determine what water rights they get and deserve," Hanson said.

The El Dorado Irrigation District shares some of the same concerns as Citizens for Water, said EID Board Director John Fraser, who is also a member of Citizens for Water.

"I think (SMUD has) taken the attitude that they can play some games with the county when it comes to relicensing, and they've been putting us in the 'parking lot,'" Fraser said. "We've been put in the parking lot for the last time."

El Dorado County Water Agency Board President Duane Wallace, South Tahoe Public Utilities District, said he is looking at some of the same problems.

"I get the distinct impression that they just hope we go away," Wallace said. "I don't think that it's this board's intention to do so."

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said the Board of Supervisors will be looking at the relicensing process during the Sept. 23 meeting and that he expects changes to be coming in the future.

"I expect that within the next few weeks, we'll be having discussions that will entice SMUD to deal with the county on an equal level rather than a stepchild level."