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Posted: Tuesday, February 1, 2011 12:00 am

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PENROSE — The idea of a hydroelectric power plant being considered for Fremont County is generating interest among local leaders.

TransCanada is pondering an \$800 million, 432-megawatt hydroelectric generating plant and storage site that could bring up to 300 construction jobs and 40 permanent jobs.

"We have interest in participating in the potential project," TransCanada spokesman Shawn Howard said. The idea originated from private land developer Mark Morley of Colorado Springs.

"Our business folks initially met with him (Morley) but we are a long way away from knowing if it makes commercial sense," Howard said.

"There are no commitments. We are just starting the process," Howard said.

State Sen. Kevin Grantham, R-Canon City, said the proposal may not go "unless we can get hydroelectric and hydro-pumpback added to the (Public Utilities Commission) renewable energy designation."

Grantham and state Reps. Keith Swerdfeger, R-Pueblo West, and Angela Giron, D-Pueblo, are working to get a bill passed that would do just that.

"We are trying to grease the skids on our end to make it possible to do that and to bring jobs to Fremont County," Grantham said.

Fremont County commissioners were first briefed on the proposal in 2007. In April 2009, they penned a letter of support for the concept as pitched by Morley of H2O HyPro LLC of Colorado Springs.

Commissioner Ed Norden said he recalled being intrigued by the idea because water would be pumped upstream at night via three pump stations over four miles, then moved back downstream during the day.

"The cost versus the value of energy generated seemed to show a pretty good economic model," Norden said. "It is classified as a nonconsumptive use of water and my question would be what would be the evaporation rate."

Norden said the timing of the proposal is good because the project could provide 40 permanent jobs at a time when Canon City is about to lose 22 jobs when Black Hills Energy closes an aged power plant.

"It would be a good offset of jobs — a great trade-off — to have a hydropower plant providing jobs after losing the jobs lost at the coal-fired plant," Norden said.

Norden also believes that electric companies are aggressively looking for energy credits, especially the green energy credits for which the Public Utilities Commission authorizes incentives.

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