



NWE-THF-4629

Electronically filed

Ms. Debbie-Anne A. Reese
Secretary
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
888 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20426

November 26, 2025

Re: NorthWestern Energy, Thompson Falls Hydroelectric Project, P-1869-066
Response to Additional Information Request

Dear Secretary Reese:

On December 29, 2023, NorthWestern Energy (NorthWestern) filed its Final License Application (License Application) with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (Commission or FERC) to relicense the existing Thompson Falls Hydroelectric Project, FERC Project No. 1869 (Project), located on the Clark Fork River, in Sanders County, Montana. On February 26, 2024, Commission staff, in accordance with section 5.21 of the Commission's regulations, issued an Additional Information Request (AIR) letter requesting that NorthWestern file additional information to assist in the evaluation of NorthWestern's relicensing proposal.

On May 23, 2024, NorthWestern filed complete responses to all but two (i.e., Questions 4 and 5)¹ of the information requests included in the February 26 AIR letter. However, NorthWestern did not provide complete responses to Questions 4 and 5 because they were the subject of ongoing settlement negotiations between NorthWestern, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes regarding fish and aquatic resources at the Project. For that reason, NorthWestern requested, and was granted, several extensions of time to December 31, 2025, to complete settlement negotiations and submit its response to Questions 4 and 5.

¹ Question 4 of the AIR letter requested additional details on NorthWestern's proposed attraction flows for the upstream fish passage facility; Question 5 requested that NorthWestern elaborate on the conceptual measures being considered to improve upstream and downstream fish passage at the project.

As discussed in detail in NorthWestern's September 18, 2025 letter to Commission staff, NorthWestern and the settlement participants were unable to reach a settlement agreement. Therefore, NorthWestern committed to filing a response to Questions 4 and 5 of the AIR letter by December 31, 2025.²

With this letter, NorthWestern is responding to AIR Questions 4 and 5. NorthWestern's response to Commission staff's AIR appears in Attachments A through F of this letter. The February 26, 2024 AIR request from Commission staff stated that, "If the required information causes any other part of the application to be inaccurate, please revise that part and refile it by the due date." Accordingly, NorthWestern is refiling Exhibits D and E with an update to the Proposed Action and cost estimates to include the detailed Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Protection, Mitigation, and Enhancement Plan (Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan).

NorthWestern is filing an updated Biological Assessment (BA) for the Project which includes the measures NorthWestern is proposing in the Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan. The BA also includes an updated Information for Planning and Consultation Report regarding listed species and critical habitat in the Project area. The revised BA can be found in Attachment E.

We are also including updated and final versions of the following management plans:

- Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan. This PM&E Plan was developed in response to AIR Question 5, and can be found in Attachment C.
- Revised Recreation Management Plan. NorthWestern filed a Recreation Management Plan in May 2024. The Recreation Management Plan has been revised to reflect NorthWestern's plans to rehabilitate the Wild Goose Landing Recreation site. The revised Recreation Management Plan describes the significant improvements to Wild Goose Landing Park that NorthWestern intends to undertake to enhance recreation at the Project during the next license term. The Revised Recreation Management Plan can be found in Attachment D.
- Fishway Operation and Maintenance Plan. On December 17, 2024, NorthWestern filed a Fishway Operations Assessment Plan. Implementation of the 2024 Fishway Operations Assessment Plan will extend for the remainder of the existing FERC License term (through December 31, 2025), including any subsequent annual license issued by FERC. The Fishway Operation and Maintenance Plan, being filed today, will guide fishway operations during the upcoming New License Term for the Project. The measures in the Fishway Operations Plan provide further inform NorthWestern's response to AIR Questions 4 and 5.

NorthWestern looks forward to continued work with Commission staff and all relicensing participants to ensure timely issuance of a new license for the Project that is supported by the scientific record developed in this relicensing effort, is consistent with Commission policy and precedent, and meets all public interest considerations under the Federal Power Act and other governing statutes.

² Letter from Nicholas Jayjack, FERC, to Andrew Welch, NorthWestern, Project No. 1869-066, Accession No. 20250227-3051 (issued Feb. 27, 2025).

Should you have any questions, please contact Andrew Welch, Manager, Hydro License Compliance (406) 444-8115 or via email at andrew.welch@northwestern.com.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Andy Welch".

Andy Welch

Manager, Hydro License Compliance

CC: Sady Babcock, NorthWestern Energy
Mike Green, NorthWestern Energy
Distribution list (attached)

Enclosure

Attachment A: Response to Questions 4 and 5 of Commission Staff's February 26, 2024 AIR

Attachment B: Exhibit E (filed in both redline and clean versions)

Attachment C: Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan

Attachment D: revised Recreation Management Plan

Attachment E: revised Biological Assessment

Attachment F: Fishway Operation and Maintenance Plan

Attachment G: Exhibit D (filed in both redline and clean versions)

Thompson Falls Hydroelectric Project #1869-060
NorthWestern Energy
Response to Additional Information Request
November 2025
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Attachment A – Response to Questions 4 and 5 of Commission Staff’s February 26, 2024 AIR

AIR No. 4

Request: *Section 2.1.1.1 of Exhibit E, Project Upstream Fish Passage Facility, states “the sampling/pool crowder (also referred to as the work station) has 3 cubic feet per second (cfs) flowing and the ladder has 6 cfs flowing pool-to-pool. Attractant flows include options of 20 cfs from the high velocity jet (HVJ) and maximum of 54 cfs from the auxiliary water system. Thus, the passage facility may utilize between 9 and 83 cfs. In addition to these operating and attractant flows at the ladder, part of one Main Channel Dam spill panels near the upstream fish passage facility may be opened to provide an additional fish attractant flow of approximately 100 to 125 cfs.” We will need to understand how NorthWestern Energy has been operating these various attraction flow sources under existing conditions and how you intend to operate them under your proposal. For instance, do you typically provide attraction flows of 20 cfs via the high velocity jet and 54 cfs through the auxiliary system at all times as flows allow while operating the fish passage facility or do you adjust attraction flow via each of these sources based on the season or based on river flow conditions? What conditions trigger opening the spill panel nearest the fish passage facility to provide additional attraction flows? Please describe how all these attraction flow mechanisms are utilized throughout the year both under current conditions and under your proposed operation.*

Response: As indicated in NorthWestern’s May 23, 2024 AIR response, the upstream fishway is currently operated using an attraction flow of 83 cfs, which is the sum of the following flow sources at the fishway entrance: (1) 3 cfs from the workstation water supply, (2) 6 cfs from the pool-to-pool water supply, (3) 20 cfs from the high velocity jet, and (4) 54 cfs from the auxiliary water system. Although NorthWestern evaluated the attraction flow benefits from providing additional spill of 100 to 125 cfs at Main Channel Dam between 2013 and 2023, the results are not conclusive on the effects on upstream passage attraction to the fishway for Target Species. NorthWestern will continue to include the use of additional spill for fish attraction as an option in the fishway evaluation program, as detailed in the Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan).

Under the Proposed Action, NorthWestern proposes to continue to provide an attraction flow of 83 cfs at the fishway entrance as described in the Fishway Operation and Maintenance Plan (filed as Attachment F to this letter). Additionally, as discussed in section 6 of the Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan filed as Attachment C to this letter (discussed in more detail in the response to AIR no. 5 below), NorthWestern proposes an iterative fishway evaluation program to implement and evaluate potential operational and fish attractant measures with the goal of incrementally improving upstream fishway effectiveness over time. The specific measures to be evaluated would be developed by NorthWestern in consultation with the resource agencies and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe on an annual basis during implementation of the program.

During the first 10 years of the new license term, NorthWestern will test the effects of various auxiliary water flows and/or gate configurations on fish attraction and movement through the fishway using the Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) model and PIT arrays within and in the near field of the fishway. NorthWestern will annually determine, after consultation with the Agencies and Tribe, which operational

settings and flows will be implemented and evaluated using the PIT arrays. If the evaluation program shows that a given measure sufficiently improves passage effectiveness, the Plan includes provisions for filing a report, for Commission approval, with a proposal to implement the measure over the long term.

AIR No. 5

Request: *Sections 2.2.4 and 7.2.2 of Exhibit E states that you propose to develop a “Fisheries and Aquatic Resources PM&E Plan” plan for improving upstream fish passage for native fish. You state that the plan would include the following measures, at a minimum: (1) during the first five years of implementation, deploy up to 8 submersible PIT antenna below the Main Channel Dam to evaluate the finer scale fish movements in the near field of the fish passage facility; (2) prepare a summary report discussing the results of the 5-year study period; (3) develop an “upstream passage improvement plan” during the next 5-year period based on the study results that includes evaluations to improve capture efficiencies of the upstream fish passage facility, any proposed operational changes, and a plan and schedule to complete any facility modifications that are determined necessary to improve upstream passage efficiency; and (4) improvements to downstream fish passage of bull trout at the project. Table 4-3 of Exhibit D, Estimated Costs for Proposed PM&E Environmental Measures, identifies a \$200,000 annual cost for implementing this plan. However, because this plan has not yet been developed, there should be a capital cost associated with developing the plan and an annual cost for implementing measures contained in the plan. Please provide an estimated capital cost for developing the plan. Additionally, for the \$200,000 annual cost, please include an itemized breakdown of costs for each of the associated measures such as a cost for deploying the PIT antenna.*

Response: As discussed above in the response to AIR No. 4, NorthWestern has revised its Proposed Action to include implementation of a Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan filed as Attachment C to this letter. The Plan establishes the goals, program objectives, tasks, and schedule for implementing the major fish and aquatic PM&E measures that NorthWestern proposes to include in a new Project license. The Plan is divided into two elements: (1) Upstream Fish Passage and (2) Downstream Fish Passage.

Table 4-3 of the License Application Exhibit D has been updated to include the capital costs for developing the Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan, which is now included in the costs to develop the License Application. Additionally, Table 4-3 of Exhibit D (Attachment G to this letter) has been updated to include the itemized capital and annual O&M costs for each of the specific proposed measures included in the Plan.

Now that the Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan has been finalized, NorthWestern requests the Commission to approve it as part of its relicensing order. NorthWestern proposes an article in the new license that provides as follows:

Article _____. Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan. The Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan, filed on November 26, 2025, is approved. Upon the effective date of the license, the licensee shall implement the Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan. Any changes to the approved Fisheries and Aquatic PM&E Plan require Commission approval prior to implementation of such change.