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A river runs it

We were startled to read that the Houston City Council was considering a deal that involves building a hydroelectric plant at Lake Livingston ("City will consider a power plant deal," Page B1, July 10).

These days, most news about hydroelectric plants is about tearing them out, not installing new ones.

The largest dam-removal project in U.S. history, involving two hydroelectric dams on Washington's Elwha River, is almost finished. In 2011, PacifiCorp, an electric company, blew up its hydroelectric dam on Washington's White Salmon River. And the 2008 removal of Marmot Dam, which used to supply power to Portland, is already considered a huge ecological success. Environmentalists would like to see other hydroelectric projects disappear too: among them, four dams on the Pacific Northwest's Klamath River; four on the Pacific Northwest's Snake River; and in Arizona, the enormous Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado River.

So why are we even discussing a new hydroelectric plant on Lake Livingston? Because every hydropower project is different. And this one - a small, environmentally sensitive project - makes sense.

For starters, the plant that East Texas Electric Cooperative proposes to build doesn't require damming the Trinity - because the Trinity, of course, is already dammed. In the 1960s, the dam in question created Lake Livingston, which provides drinking water for the city of Houston. Not even the most ardent environmentalists suggest getting rid of that dam. It's doing important work, and its environmental impact isn't nearly as harsh as those dams in the Northwest and desert Southwest.

Nor will the hydroelectric plant change water levels in either Lake Livingston or the Trinity. Electric-plant operators won't decide when the dam releases water; the Trinity River Authority will continue to hold that power. The only difference is that after the plant is built, turbines will capture the water's energy as it rushes past. When there's a lot of water, all three turbines will whirl. When there's a little, only one or two. And when there's none, the plant won't generate any

electricity at all.

The plant is designed to oxygenate the water as it moves through the turbines - a process that cuts into the amount of energy generated slightly but makes a big difference to the fish downstream. Tough regulatory agencies - including the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have approved the plan.

And we were pleased that the Houston City Council did, too. Because Houston owns the rights to the water, the East Texas Electric Cooperative will pay it \$66.5 million over the next 50 years - money that the city will receive without doing anything at all and without assuming any of the risk involved with building the plant.

Admittedly, the plant won't be the backbone of the East Texas Electric Cooperative. It'll generate only 24 megawatts - but that's still enough renewable energy to power 12,000 houses, without generating any air or water pollution.

Texas and the U.S. have a long way to go as we move toward a future of clean, sustainable energy. This plant helps us get there.

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