The Desges River, a tributary to the Allier, is a crucial site for the spawning of Atlantic salmon. It supplies the National Conservatory of Wild Salmon, inaugurated in 2001, with high-quality water. However, a micro hydropower plant project that is eligible to receive feed-in tariffs is threatening this critical river. The hydropower plant, whose construction is currently suspended, would have a capacity of 76 kW - 39 times less than a single average on-shore wind turbine. The project is currently under review by the Chanteuge association for the preservation of the heritage.[1]

A UNIQUE RIVER FOR SALMON CONSERVATION IN FRANCE

The Desges River hosts protected migratory fish and is classified as a conservation area for such fish under national law. [2] It is located in a biological reservoir and flows within two Natura 2000 sites. It has a very good status according to the Water Framework Directive (WFD).

The National Wild Salmon Conservatory of Chanteuges has been operating on the Desges River since 2000. In 2017, the river was identified to be restocked with salmon by civil society and the local administration. The Conservatory releases into the wild two million young wild salmon at various stages of development each year. However, despite the efforts of the Conservatory to reinforce a population on the verge of extinction, only a few hundred of these salmon reach the upper Allier, compared to tens of thousands in the past.
**Salmon Conservation Threatened by a Small Hydropower Project**

Despite the unique biodiversity of the stream, a group of municipalities is planning to construct a 75 kW micro hydropower plant on a former mill site. It would be operated by Cegelec, a subsidiary of the construction company Vinci. The mill benefits from a specific legal regime ("droit fondé en titre") which allows the developer to build a hydropower plant without an environmental authorisation. According to estimates by the National Wild Salmon Conservatory, the hydropower plant will cause sudden variations in water flow, which are likely to happen about once a month. These will impact the breeding environment at the salmon farm. The project does not include any discharge mechanism to limit these sudden variations.

Moreover, the project does not take into account the impact of climate change on hydrology. This will undoubtedly also affect the electricity production of the plant. The mean flow of the Desges River has already fallen by a quarter since 1970 and is expected to fall by a further 20% by mid-century (2046-2065). [1] Thanks to the efforts of local NGOs and residents, the project was suspended in 2021, even though construction work had already started. Nethertheless, it still has not been entirely abandoned and, sadly, the site has not been restored to its original condition.

**Feed-In Tariffs, Artificial Profits**

At a public meeting in October 2016, the operator explained that the feed-in tariff would allow the company to earn between €70,000 and €78,000 per year. [3] After deducting charges, the profit would be €24,000 per year, i.e. €2000 per month. Without the feed-in tariff, therefore, the plant would most probably not be profitable.

**Conclusions**

The National Wild Salmon Conservatory is an essential tool to save the last population of long migrating salmon in Western Europe. The construction of a micro hydropower plant upstream of the Conservatory illustrates the inconsistencies between the development of micro hydropower and biodiversity protection. By making such micro hydropower plants profitable, feed-in tariffs directly contribute to the degradation of precious ecosystems.


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**Hydropower Development in France**

In 2018, the overall French hydropower infrastructure consisted of approximately 2,500 plants, totalling an installed capacity of 25.5 GW. It includes about 400 hydropower concessions representing 90% of the overall power and 2,100 small plants (installed capacity < 4.5 MW) representing 10% of the overall installed capacity.

Since 2016, the small plants can benefit from one of two types of financial support: the feed-in tariffs (plants < 500kW) or the premium on electricity sales, notably granted to the plants between 0.5 and 4.5 MW.

The Auvergne Rhône-Alpes region is the leading French region for hydropower, with 11.6 GW of electric power, which represented 45% of national production in 2019. This region is home to rivers with high biodiversity value, including the last wild rivers in Europe, which are home to migratory fish. Despite their unique value, producers continue to invest in small hydropower plants on these high-stake rivers as they receive financial support.

This case-study was drafted by Emma Liberati, based on the contribution of:

Mr Roberto Epple, President and Mr Simon Burner, Director, European Rivers Network (ERN),

Mr Jacques Pulou, Pilote du réseau Eau, France Nature Environnement Auvergne Rhône-Alpes,

Mr Guillaume Ponsonnaille, Syndicat Intercommunal de gestion de l’Alagnon et de ses affluents (SIGAL).

For more information

Emma Liberati
European Rivers Network, emma.liberati@rivernet.org

Claire Baffert
Senior Water Policy Officer, WWF EPO, cbaffert@wwf.eu

WWF and European Rivers Network are working in partnership to halt the loss of life in European rivers.

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