

From:

Free Rivers Fund

Non-Profit Organisation

General-Eccher-Straße 1

6020 Innsbruck

Austria



To:

Norges vassdrags- og energidirektorat (NVE) Konsesjonssaker

Att: Jakob Fjellanger

Saksnummer 201104735

***Vedrørende: Planendringssøknad – minste driftsvassføring / Sauland kraftverk [17.11.2025]***

**Regarding: Application for plan amendment – minimum operating water flow / Sauland power plant [17.11.2025]**

We refer to Sauland Kraftverk AS's application for a change of plan dated July 28th, 2024, and application dated April 3rd, 2025.

This response is given on behalf of the Free Rivers Fund, a river conservation non-profit organisation working internationally, with headquarters in Austria. With growing concern for Norway's rivers we have been following Norwegian policy decisions regarding hydropower & river protection for years now. We were especially concerned about the Storting vote to simplify the processing of applications for power development in protected watercourses, which prompted us to get involved in Norwegian river protection issues. We have been requested by several Norwegians to weigh in on this specific case and to formulate an objection – and we hereby comply with this request.

We may remind you that Norway is bound by the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement, which requires compliance with key EU environmental laws. Hydropower projects that contravene water and habitat protections could be challenged through the EEA framework. We argue that the requested amendments to the Sauland hydropower plant are in contradiction with the EU water framework directive.

Therefore **we oppose the measure to reduce the minimum operating water flow from 11.2 m<sup>3</sup>/s to approx. 3.7 m<sup>3</sup>/s, and oppose any deviation from the conditions regarding measures for eel migration.** We believe that there is insufficient argumentation and impact assessment to make this decision and urge you to consider the following arguments in your decision:

## 1. Background – documented unprofitability as motivation

It is clear from Sauland Kraftverk AS's letter (03.04.2025) that the project was halted in 2024 because the costs were far higher than budgeted:

*"Unfortunately, it turned out that the bids received in the spring of 2024 would result in a development cost that was far higher than forecasts and budget prices obtained in the fall of 2023. For this reason, Sauland Kraftverk AS found it necessary on September 11, 2024, to halt the ongoing procurement and application processes."*

**This clearly documents that the measure is now driven by a need for increased profitability**, as the costs incurred prior to the start of construction were too high. It can clearly be assumed that the **evaluation of lower minimum water flow has mainly been assessed in relation to the profitability of the project**, whereby a comprehensive assessment of this has been overlooked. With such a marginal project, we find it difficult to understand why it is being considered at all, given the significant downsides and risks, as well as the loss of fishing and tourism.

## 2. Consequences of the reduction of minimum water flow

The proposed reduction means that the hydropower plant can extract more water during low water situations. This results in:

- undue pressure on the ecosystem, **risk of greater biodiversity loss** across all species verifiable on site
- the proposed lower residual flow of approx. 3.7 m<sup>3</sup>/s lowers the traction force of the river promoting a silted and elevated riverbed, leading to a **greater likelihood of destructive flood events** in the area
- excessively low residual flows like the proposed 3.7 m<sup>3</sup>/s lead to river ecosystem **failing to provide the ecosystem service provisions** they usually perform: cleaning their water, moving silt, sand, sediment and debris, positively influencing their micro climate, the ability to retain water during flood as well as drought events
- reduced recreational value along the entire stretch; reduced tourism

## 3. The environmental claims in the application are not scientifically documented

The developer claims that reduced minimum water flow will result in *"smoother transitions"* and thus be positive for the environment. The generalised claim, a hydro power plant leaving *less* residual water would be *positive* for the environment may only come from a developer. This *may* be possible in very specific situations, eg. if sunk and surge is reduced - but frankly and simply is not the case here. No scientist would make this generalised claim and so it is no surprise that there is **no documented scientific assessment showing:**

- how fish (trout, salmon, eel) will be affected by significantly lower residual flow
- how benthic fauna, river mussels, and spawning areas will be affected
- how an increased proportion of low-water days will affect the ecological status

#### 4. Relationship to the Nature Diversity Act and Water Regulations

Reduced minimum water flow violates:

- the precautionary principle (§ 9).
- the principle of overall impact (§ 10).
- the ecological status of water bodies according to the Water Regulations.

**There is no assessment showing that the measure can maintain “good ecological status.”**

#### 5. Eel migration

The developer is also applying for exemption from establishing a solution for eel migration. Eels are a highly endangered species, and **the precautionary principle dictates that requirements for measures must be maintained.**

#### 6. Conclusion

Based on the above, we request that NVE:

- **reject the application to lower the minimum residual water flow.**
- require the **maintenance of the “good ecological status”** is given significant weight in the decision making
- **maintain the requirements for mitigation measures** and eel migration.
- require that outdoor life and recreational value be given significant weight.
- **conduct a thorough impact assessment** of, among other things, costs, benefits, and nature.

## Addendum

With a heavy heart we have been following all the rivers that have been developed in Norway over the years. The first developments had minimal or no impact assessments, and have had extreme consequences for ecosystems — not only in the rivers themselves, but also on the surrounding areas, as well as in the associated fjords and estuaries.

Today the Science is very clear on two things:

a) Hydropower is not the 'green', clean energy we thought it was some decades ago and not the solution to the climate crisis developers claim it to be.

b) Today, freshwater ecosystems are the most endangered ecosystems on the planet, with the highest rates of biodiversity loss. At the same time we need healthy rivers and freshwater ecosystems in trying to adapt to changing climate.

Of course we understand the need for renewable energy production, but **especially considering the high degree of hydropower development in Norway overall, each and every new proposed development has to be considered carefully and thoroughly.** This project in particular has such a marginal energy output, even with the approval of the requested changes, that we urge you to carefully weigh it against the considerable ecological damage it will cause.

With kind regards and on behalf of Norwegian and international river conservationists, environmentalists and outdoor enthusiasts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A. Stevens', is written over a horizontal line.

[Anne Stevens for the Free Rivers Fund, 01.12.2025]