Water Power Technologies

Hydropower accounts for almost 7 percent of total electricity generation and is the largest source of renewable energy and utility-scale energy storage in the country. With millions of miles of rivers and lakes, the nation stands poised to increase renewable energy production through water power technologies. Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) R&D activities are focused on lowering the costs of hydropower, enhancing hydropower’s contributions to the resilience and reliability of the nation’s electric power grid, and studying ways to reduce environmental impacts and improve the regulatory process for hydropower.

Research and Development

ORNL’s water power technologies research focuses on cost reduction and performance improvement to increase power generation at existing hydropower facilities and accelerate sustainable implementation of new facilities. These research efforts leverage ORNL strengths in data analytics, high-performance computing, materials science, environmental science, and advanced manufacturing. Focus areas include:

Decision-making tools—Providing tools and technologies to assist with design and real-time optimization of hydropower generation that reduce cost, increase efficiency, and enhance hydropower contribution to the US electric power grid

Data analytics and modeling—Generating key data and models that enable new R&D and improve the operations, value, and sustainability of entire fleets of hydropower facilities

Early-stage technologies—Developing new composite turbine designs, floating membrane reservoirs, and pumped-storage technologies to accelerate the growth of US hydropower generation

“We’re analyzing the interface between hydropower and the grid and evaluating the critical role that water power will play in decarbonizing the economy.”

Hope Corsair, Energy Economist, Power Systems Resilience Group
Recent Impacts

Climate change—Projecting future climate and water availability to support long-term resource planning

National hydropower map—Showcasing hydropower resources across the country

Standard modular hydropower—Advancing ecologically compatible, cost-optimized technology designs for small-footprint hydropower generation

HydroSource tools—Providing easy access to key information about national streams, existing infrastructure, and potential new hydropower sites

Hydropower fleet intelligence—Enabling hydropower owners to benchmark cost, reliability, and equipment, driving continuous improvement

Hydropower Market Report—Offering a comprehensive picture of trends shaping the industry

Additive manufacturing—Exploring innovative hydropower technologies with cost-reduction potential in collaboration with industry

Hydropower as an electric power system enabler—Modeling and enhancing hydropower capabilities to support a reliable and resilient electric power system

Pumped-storage technologies—Developing new systems like membrane reservoirs to increase flexibility and lower the costs of installing new hydroelectric energy storage

CONTACT

Shih-Chieh Kao
Interim Manager
Water Power Technologies Program
kaos@ornl.gov
865-576-1259
One Bethel Valley Road,
Oak Ridge, TN 37830

This visualization of ORNL datasets shows the geospatial distribution and characteristics of current US operational hydropower plants. Source: https://hydrosource.ornl.gov/node/242