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American River back in its bed

A tunnel, part of the unbuilt Auburn dam project, is being plugged after decades.

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The waters of the American River began splashing into their old channel near Auburn this week, freed from a tunnel built decades ago during aborted construction of the Auburn dam.

While the change will create prettier river views and perhaps new whitewater opportunities, it probably won't have much impact on whether the dam is revived, say both friends and foes of a proposed dam.

Even its staunchest supporters acknowledge that for now, the Auburn dam has gone dormant, stalled by a change of leadership in Congress, studies outlining high costs, and the political difficulties of a key champion.

The dam, first begun in the 1960s and heralded as a way to protect Sacramento from disastrous floods, was abandoned because of earthquake risks and strong opposition.

"I'm a realist," said Placer County Supervisor Bruce Kranz, a longtime dam advocate. "We won't see any movement in the near term on the Auburn dam unless there's a severe drought or a storm comes in and creates catastrophic events downstream."

The movement that is going on this week near Auburn, of earth and rocks and water being shunted about by federal crews, is part of a long-term effort to clean up the old construction site.

The work includes new pumps to deliver water to a growing and thirsty Placer County, and restored river flow through a new series of mini-rapids that will help safely feed those pumps.

The changes were designed to ensure that if Californians someday want an Auburn dam, it would be possible to direct the river back into the tunnel, said Einar Maisch, director of strategic affairs for the Placer County Water Agency.

The 2,400-foot-long tunnel, built to keep the construction site dry, will be capped at both ends but not filled.

Meanwhile, though, "the people have the river back," said Ronald Stork, a senior policy advocate for Friends of the River. "It's going to look better as time progresses, and people are going to have the opportunity to boat on it."

Otis Wollan, who sits on the Placer County Water Agency board, describes the reborn stretch of river as a potential recreational magnet.

"It's within half an hour from downtown Sacramento. It's a 2½ to three mile absolutely beautiful float," Wollan said, and so close to downtown Auburn that it's likely to boost commerce there.

The water agency's Maisch is a little less glowing, cautioning that because of power plants far upstream, the best water flows are unlikely to start until late afternoon.

No matter what future summers bring, though, the federal Bureau of Reclamation is warning that for now, the site is closed to water enthusiasts because of construction.

The decades-long effort to build an Auburn dam retreated into a state of suspended animation after the 2006 elections ended the Republican majority in the House and Senate.

The most vocal activist for the dam in Congress, Rep. John Doolittle, declared after the election: "My range of options is constrained when I'm in the minority."

Since then, Doolittle's entanglement in the deepening investigation of Jack Abramoff and political corruption has virtually sidelined the Roseville Republican.

After an FBI raid on Doolittle's suburban Virginia home in April, the congressman was pressured into stepping down from his seat on the House Appropriations Committee and its energy and water subcommittee. It was from that subcommittee position that Doolittle had been able to steer money toward the revival of the dam when Republicans were in power.

"The congressman still fully supports the idea of the Auburn dam and thinks it's necessary," Gordon Hinkle, his communications director, said Wednesday. "But he realizes that the political climate will not allow for it at this time."

The work under way fulfills a commitment to restore the construction site that the Bureau of Reclamation made in 2000, after prodding from California's attorney general.

The state was concerned that water had been diverted into a tunnel for years.

The Placer County Water Agency was unhappy, too. After work started on the original dam in the 1960s, a pumping station that lifted American River water into a pipeline that supplied Placer County residents was torn down.

The idea had been that once the new reservoir behind the dam filled, gravity would carry water into the pipeline and no pumps would be needed. But as the dam languished, Placer County limped by with temporary pumps, pulled out each winter, to serve a growing population.

Wollan said it got to the point that "either you do a permanent pump station or growth will stop in Placer County. We were talking about no alternative but to essentially declare a moratorium on building."

Work on the new pumps began in 2002, and on Tuesday the Bureau of Reclamation began routing water toward the pumps for testing, by breaking down small sections of a dirt wall that kept water away from the riverbed.

"It's gone a little bit better than we expected," Drew Lessard, the bureau's project manager, said Wednesday afternoon. "The majority of the flow is going through the new river channel."

The channel follows basically the same course the river took before it was diverted into a tunnel. The entire project, including a boat takeout area, is scheduled to be completed in January.

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