

Proposed federal budget includes funds to raise Shasta Dam

Damon Arthur, Record Searchlight Published 4:37 p.m. PT March 14, 2018 | Updated 5:12 p.m. PT March 14, 2018

The proposal to raise the height of Shasta Dam is back on the table, with a 2019 federal budget request of \$20 million for pre-construction and design work on the structure.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and several other water agencies in the state have been interested in raising the height of the dam for decades. But in 2015 the effort stalled after the bureau said it would need nonfederal agencies to help pay the cost of the \$1.3 billion project.



(Photo: Greg Barnette/Record Searchlight)

The bureau is interested in getting the project moving again and requested Congress include in the budget \$20 million to begin design and pre-construction work, said Erin Curtis, a spokeswoman for the bureau.

“Investing in new infrastructure at Shasta will create a needed and significant new water supply for California’s families, farmers, cities and environmental resources,” Curtis said in an email.

“Pursuant to the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation (WIIN) Act of 2016 and new funding appropriated in 2017, Reclamation recommended to Congress seven diverse projects for funding, including pre-construction work on Shasta Dam,” Curtis wrote.

Funding for raising the height of the dam 18.5 feet still requires nonfederal partners, but it is clear California won’t be one of them and state officials do not want the project to go forward.

John Laird, California’s secretary for natural resources, sent a letter to leaders in the House and Senate on Tuesday opposing raising the dam.

Laird pointed out that the McCloud River is a protected stream under state law and portions of it could be inundated if the dam is raised. Because the McCloud is a protected river, the state could not help share in the cost of the project, Laird said.

“As such, I ask that you not pursue the Shasta Dam enlargement project, which disregards California law, and instead work with the state of California to fund water storage projects consistent with our California Water Action Plan and Proposition 1,” the letter says.

Raising the height of the dam has been studied at least as far back as 1980, but the bureau began work on a feasibility study and environmental reports in 2010. In 2015 the bureau concluded raising the dam would be feasible, but the agency wanted state and local agencies to share in the cost.

The San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority, an irrigation agency out of Los Banos, has expressed interest in helping pay for work on the dam.

In a draft letter to the bureau, the authority’s general manager cited the need to raise the dam as a component of the CALFED program, a 1990s effort to restore the San Joaquin Delta through several water projects.

“The water authority concurs with the statements that recognize the significance of new storage,” according to a letter to the bureau from the authority’s Interim Executive and General Counsel Jon D. Rubin.

“For that reason, the water authority is willing to consider becoming a local partner, entering into an MOU and ultimately a formal agreement for the sharing of costs for the Shasta Dam and reservoir enlargement,” Rubin said.

U.S. Rep. Doug La Malfa could not be reached Wednesday for comment on the most recent push on the dam.

However, a spokesman for La Malfa said in 2015 that the congressman supports raising the dam, but wants to make sure property owners living around Lake Shasta will be compensated if their land is inundated by a higher lake level.

The environmental studies on the proposal say parts of several roads around the lake would be inundated, as well as some bridges, campgrounds and resorts.

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe has opposed the dam raise because, the tribe says, many of their sacred sites along the McCloud River would be under water due to the higher lake level.

Cal Trout, which advocates for anglers and stream preservation statewide, sent out a mailer to its members this week urging them to let their state and federal representatives how they feel about the dam raise proposal.

Curtis Knight, the group’s executive director, said Cal Trout was against raising the dam. He said the dam raise would inundate about 3 miles of the McCloud River, a prized trout fishing stream.

The Bureau of Reclamation is also studying whether to re-introduce endangered winter-run chinook to the McCloud River. The winter-run once spawned in the McCloud, but construction of Shasta and Keswick dams blocked access to the river.

Cal Trout and other environmental groups have also refuted the bureau's claims that raising the height of the dam will benefit the environment, including endangered salmon.

Knight said members of Congress and the bureau may think the time is ripe to move forward with raising the dam because the Trump administration would be more interested than the previous administration in paying for it.

"I think that's a big part of it," Knight said. "They may think that now is the time to strike."

<https://www.redding.com/story/news/2018/03/14/proposed-federal-budget-includes-funds-raise-shasta-dam/426573002/>