

Editorial: Feds lose focus, waste money with Shasta Dam studies

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The federal government should quit wasting time and loads of money on feasibility studies for a proposal to raise Shasta Dam that will never happen.

It'll never fly for many reasons, but first consider who's in favor of the loopy idea: The main proponents of spending \$1.3 billion (a price that's certain to skyrocket, because that's what happens with government projects) to raise the dam by 18 1/2 feet are farmers in the San Joaquin Valley.

The federal government this week said it won't pay to enlarge the reservoir, and the state apparently wants nothing to do with the idea either. But giant irrigation districts south of the delta like the Westlands Water District might fork over money because water is the new gold in California.

Unfortunately, shipping 640,000 more acre-feet of water south of the delta each year would enable farmers there who are making unwise decisions, such as planting orchards in the middle of a seasonal desert. Trees produce big-dollar crops, but row crops make more sense in a region with an unreliable water supply. Unlike orchards, fields can be fallowed in a drought.

Strangely, the cost won't be the biggest obstacle.

Rich water districts will make everyone happy. Westlands bought Bollibaka, an upscale fishing club with cabins where the McCloud River runs into the lake, nearly a decade ago. Now it has one less opponent. Money talks.

Two of the biggest problems relate to a river and an Indian tribe

First, the McCloud River above the lake is protected as a blue-ribbon trout stream by the state. That's why the state cannot sanction the raising of the dam, according to a report released Wednesday on the project's feasibility. Raising the dam 18 1/2 feet would inundate many miles of pristine canyons.

In that same canyon are cultural and religious sites revered by the Winnemen band of Wintu Indians. Other sites around the lake also have cultural and religious significance to Indians. The government didn't have to take that into consideration when it first built the dam. The courts certainly will now.

Then there are just the infrastructure problems. Cabins, businesses, resorts, campgrounds, roads and bridges all would have to be moved. And of course, people who own lakeside land would have to be compensated handsomely.

Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, issued a vague statement about the feasibility study. He's supportive of enlarging the lake, but only if residents and businesses are compensated.

“California’s voters spoke loudly last year in support of investment in water infrastructure, but ensuring that local residents, businesses and infrastructure are given proper consideration is key,” LaMalfa said in a statement. “Should this project move forward, I will work to ensure that those residents and businesses who could be affected are justly compensated and have an opportunity to relocate on the lake.”

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