

Construction contract to raise height of Shasta Dam expected next year

Damon Arthur

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After years of environmental studies, feasibility reports and stalled plans, federal officials are once again moving forward with plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam and intend to award the first construction contract next year.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation plans to advertise for bids on a construction contract in September 2019 and award a bid by December 2019, said Todd Plain, a spokesman for the agency.

So far, Congress has only allocated \$20 million for the project, well short of the total \$1.4 billion projected cost. Building the concrete, 18½-foot tall structure on top of the dam is expected to cost \$350 million, Plain said.

With a higher dam, the lake level could rise as much as 20 feet higher when the lake is full, forcing the bureau to move numerous roads, bridges, campgrounds, buildings and resorts.

Construction to raise the height of the dam would begin sometime in late spring or summer 2020, Plain said. Construction would take about five years, according to an environmental impact report done on the project.

While the bureau has its construction timelines set, opposition to the project has also been well established for years and hasn't gone away.

The state of California, environmental groups and the Winnemem Wintu Tribe remain opposed to the project.

State officials say raising the height of the dam would violate state law because it would inundate a portion of the McCloud River, a protected river under state law.

Plain said the federal government is trying to resolve that problem.



Federal officials are moving ahead with plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

“We are currently working with the state regarding the path forward for the project,” Plain said.

But Lisa Lien-Mager, a spokeswoman for the California Natural Resources Agency, said state officials were unaware of any talks or agreements regarding the McCloud River.

John Laird, the state’s Secretary for Natural Resources, sent a letter to congressional leaders in March urging them not to include funding for the dam raise in the budget.

“As you may be aware, the Shasta Dam enlargement project would violate California law due to the adverse impacts that project may have on the McCloud River and its fishery,” the letter said.



Federal officials are moving forward with plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

Laird urged Congress to seek other ways to increase water storage in the state.

State and federal officials are pushing plans to build Sites Reservoir in Colusa County west of Maxwell. That project is eligible for a portion of the \$2.7 billion set aside for water storage under Proposition 1 bond funds.

Under state law, California also could not dedicate funds toward efforts to raise the dam because of the McCloud River, Laird noted in his letter.

Steve Evans, a water policy consultant for Friends of the River, said the organization will go to court if necessary to prevent the bureau from raising the height of the dam.

“We intend to uphold state law, even if the Trump administration doesn’t,” Evans said, referring to restrictions on further inundating the McCloud River.

Evans said Friends of the River is against the dam raise for several other reasons as well. He said the dam would not provide the drought relief and benefits to the environment that bureau officials claim it would.

A higher dam would allow greater water reliability for drinking water and agriculture during drought years, especially as the water demand grows along with the state population, bureau officials have said.

Raising the dam’s height would increase the reservoir’s capacity by about 14 percent, the bureau said.

More water in the lake would also benefit Chinook salmon downstream of the dam in the Sacramento River because a deeper pool would provide more of the cold water the fish need for spawning in the river, the bureau said.

But Evans said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has said the higher dam would provide little benefit to salmon living downstream of the dam in the Sacramento River.

He also pointed out the effect raising the height of the dam would have on the Winnemen Wintu Tribe, which once lived along the McCloud River, but were forced to move when the dam was first built in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Caleen Sisk, chief and spiritual leader of the Winnemem, said there are numerous ceremonial and sacred sites along the McCloud River Arm of the lake that would be inundated if the dam were raised.

The bureau will work to “identify significant sites and measures to avoid, minimize or mitigate effects on those sites will be considered through the National Historic Preservation Act process,” Plain said.

Sisk said she doubts whether all of the Winnemem sites could be protected along the McCloud Arm of the lake.

“Even if that’s possible, it’s going to be expensive,” she said.

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