

Contested McClure reservoir expansion project inches forward Rival interests watch closely

By JOSHUA EMERSON SMITH

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After years of frustration, Merced Irrigation District officials continue to push for a \$40 million reservoir expansion project, which would have brought in roughly 360,000 acre-feet of extra water over the last 30 years, according to data from the district.

"This project is incredibly important to MID growers and to our community as a whole," said Mike Jensen, MID spokesman. "Keep in mind that a third of our county's economic activity results from agricultural production and processing."

However, conservation groups argue that the project would provide little benefit to growers while compromising the environmental health of nearby ecosystems.

The plan would provide an average of less than 15,000 acre-feet of water a year, said Bob Center, executive director of The Friends of the River. An acre-foot is the amount of water it would take to cover 1 acre 1 foot deep.

"It will encroach on a wild-and-scenic river," he said. "It will kill fully protected species, destroy habitat, drown four or five miles of trails and all of this is for a puny return."



Merced Sun-Star - MARCI STENBERG
Merced Irrigation District spillway gate at the main reservoir, Lake McClure a half mile or more away from the dam on the northwest end of the lake.



Merced Sun Star

The Merced Irrigation District has proposed to expand its reservoir capacity by 70,000 acre-feet through raising the spillway as much as 10 feet at its main storage reservoir, Lake McClure. The spillway is the structure that guides water safely downstream when the reservoir is full.

Over the years, there have been particularly wet seasons in which the runoff from the Sierra Nevada has provided significantly more water than the reservoir could hold.

Damming that extra water would periodically flood about a half-mile of the Merced River where it flows into the Lake McClure -- something conservationists say would kill limestone salamanders and elderberry longhorn beetles, fully protected species under state or federal law.

However, for the MID project to move forward, Congress would have to remove the "wild-and-scenic" designation for this part of the Merced River.

Last week the house approved a bill, carried by Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Turlock, that would do just that.

"It's a small step," Denham said. "We need thousands of jobs in the Central Valley, and we need many more projects like this."

While the bill was part of a larger public lands package crafted by conservatives, several Democratic representatives from the Central Valley supported the deal, including Jim Costa and Dennis Cardoza.

Now the bill goes to the Senate. Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer have not stated their views on the project.

Environmentalists argue that if the bill passes, the move would set a dangerous precedent.

"Our concern is that this will happen on the Tuolumne, on the Kings and on the Eel River," Center said. "If you remove the wild-and-scenic designation on the remaining free-flowing streams, then these types of projects will be built."

If MID's project moves forward, it would be paid for with bond service and reserve funding, and could include a ratepayer hike, Jensen said. The extra water could provide revenue from added hydropower generation.

"MID has invested tens of millions of dollars in infrastructure improvements and projects, and we still have some of the most affordable water rates in the entire state," Jensen said. "If it proceeds, the project will be funded in the most efficient manner possible."



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Chia Xiong, of Merced, fishes at Lake McClure
outside of Snelling, Calif.

The MID has about \$131 million in total liabilities and about \$230 million in total assets, according to the district's financial statements for 2010-11.

Reporter Joshua Emerson Smith can be reached at (209)385-2486 or jsmith@mercedsunstar.com.

<http://www.mercedsunstar.com/2012/06/26/2398979/contested-mcclure-reservoir-expansion.html>