

Tiny salamanders could stand in the way of massive dam raising project

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A trio of tiny salamanders could stand in the way of a massive \$1.4 billion project to raise the height of Shasta Dam.

An environmental organization has filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, asking a judge to force the federal agency to make a determination on whether three salamander species living around Lake Shasta should be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The suit was filed after the wildlife service failed to act on a [2012 request from the Center for Biological Diversity](#) to list the three amphibian species as either endangered or threatened under federal law.

The agency had one year to decide to list the amphibians or reject the request, said Jenny Loda, an attorney for the group.

Because the federal agency did not rule on the request, the center sued, she said.

What happens with [the center's request could affect the plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam](#) by 18½ feet, she said.

If the agency determines the three closely related amphibians, the Shasta salamander, Samwel Shasta salamander and Wintu Shasta salamander are threatened with extinction the bureau would have to find a way to raise the dam without harming the 4-inch amphibians.

That could be hard to do, Loda said.

"I am not sure whether there is a way for them to raise the height of the dam without impacting the salamanders." Loda said. "It seems that any increase in the level of Shasta Lake will have some impact on one or more species of Shasta salamanders."



A lawsuit filed Tuesday asks a judge to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether the Shasta Salamander should be listed as an endangered or threatened species. Such a determination could affect plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam. (Photo: James Bettaso/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)



Federal officials want to raise the height of Shasta Dam to store more water in Lake Shasta. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

The Shasta salamander is a small, lungless amphibian that is only found in Shasta County, according to the lawsuit. The salamander was considered one species until a scientific study released in April 2018 [split it into three species](#), based upon DNA analysis.

The lawsuit was filed Thursday in U.S. District Court in San Francisco.

Pam Bierce, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said she could not comment on pending litigation.

Last spring, Congress approved \$20 million for preconstruction and design work on raising the dam. This summer, crews drilled core samples into the dam to determine whether it could withstand the extra weight of another 18½ feet in height.

RELATED: [Work begins on raising the height of Shasta Dam](#)

Bureau officials hope to award the first construction contract on raising the dam by the end of 2019, with work beginning in 2020. Raising the height of the dam would require moving numerous roads, bridges, campgrounds, homes and other facilities to higher ground.

The bureau is also working to get state and local partners to help pay 50 percent of the project's cost.

One of those partners, the Westlands Water District out of Fresno, is holding a meeting in Redding next Wednesday to give a presentation on the project and take written comments to begin work on an environmental impact report.

The meeting is from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. in the Palomino Room at the Holiday Inn at 1900 Hilltop Drive.

Loda said raising the dam would be bad for the salamanders because the water level in the lake could rise up to 20½ higher than current limits when the lake is full, inundating more salamander habitat.

The project would also mean moving businesses, homes, roads and other structures farther into salamander territory, she said.



Federal officials want to raise the height of Shasta Dam to store more water in Lake Shasta. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

"We would like the Bureau of Reclamation to scrap its plans to raise the Shasta Dam. This is a damaging project, not just for the Shasta salamander, but for many other species of plants and wildlife that already had habitat destroyed by the Shasta Dam," Loda said.

Several years ago the Center for Biological Diversity asked the fish and wildlife service to consider listing four species of snail found near Lake Shasta as either threatened or endangered.

Like the salamanders, the agency did not meet the deadline to determine whether the mollusks needed federal protection, Loda said.

The center is not the only group opposed to raising the dam. The state of California is against the project because it would further inundate the McCloud River, which is protected under state law.

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe also is against the dam raise because, the tribe says, higher water levels in the lake would harm sacred ceremonial sites along the McCloud Arm of the lake, the tribe's ancestral homeland.



Nathan Morgan hangs over the side of Shasta Dam on Thursday. Morgan and others were drilling holes in the dam to test the strength of the concrete in preparation for raising the height of the dam. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)



Shasta Dam (Photo: Record Searchlight photo)

<https://www.redding.com/story/news/2018/12/05/tiny-salamanders-may-stand-way-massive-shasta-dam-raising-project/2210322002/>