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Federal efforts to raise Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet spark conversations about environmental impacts

By Emily Hom | Staff

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Recent plans to enlarge California's Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet have raised concerns over possible cultural and ecological implications on wildlife among the Winnemem Wintu people and environmental groups alike.

Shasta Dam on the Sacramento River is run by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which has been evaluating its potential raise for more than 20 years. After a 2015 feasibility report and environmental impact statement, the bureau determined that an 18.5-foot raise would cost about \$1.3 billion.

According to Westlands Water District General Manager Thomas Birmingham, about 3,500 feet of McCloud River would be inundated for three months out of some years.

"There are cultural resources that would potentially be affected, but the bureau and Westlands Water District are very sensitive to those issues and are interested in working with them," Birmingham said.

The change in flood patterns would likely affect vital sacred sites for the Winnemen Wintu Puberty Ceremony for young women, according to the Winnemem Wintu website. The project would also relocate roads, railroads, bridges and marinas, according to a fact sheet from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The current size of Shasta Dam still allows for spilling and flooding during wet years, according to Director of UC Berkeley's River-Lab Matt Kondolf. Without these floods, the river could deteriorate rapidly and negatively impact salmon habitats.

"The McCloud River is very important because that's a state wild and scenic river; it's a really remarkable place ecologically and culturally as well — very important for the tribes," Kondolf said. "The dam is going to impact the flow regime and make the river less dynamic."

According to Birmingham, the Bureau of Reclamation is still determining potential effects of enlarging the dam, since it could provide a "significant" benefit to winter-run Chinook salmon, which are listed as an endangered species.

Birmingham added that the enlargement would increase flood control and the capacity to generate electricity. It would also provide more water supply for farmers, cities, municipal buildings and industry.

“Enlarging Shasta Dam is the most cost-effective surface water storage project currently being evaluated in California. As the climate is changing, we have to more efficiently manage water resources,” Birmingham said. “Half of (the) water produced by enlarging the dam would be used for the protection and enhancement of fishery resources, particularly salmon.”

Kondolf suggested that although the plans to enlarge the dam attempt to benefit local agriculture, one small group of corporate farmers would ultimately benefit.

Because the dam was identified to be environmentally beneficial under the feasibility report, 50 percent of the cost of building the dam would be provided through appropriations in President Donald Trump’s budget, according to Birmingham.

Kondolf, who emphasized the alternatives to raising the dam, said there are other ways to store water.

“The aquifers could store at least 10, probably 100 times more water than the Shasta Dam, even if it’s raised,” Kondolf said. “It’s nothing that can’t be figured out if we’re motivated.”

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<http://www.dailycal.org/2019/03/06/federal-efforts-to-raise-shasta-dam-by-18-5-feet-spark-conversations-about-environmental-impacts/>

Friends of the River Addendum: The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation completed its final environmental impact statement and final feasibility report in 2014 and 2015. The McCloud River is protected in a provision of the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. However, it is not part of the California wild and scenic river system.