

Trump's Interior Pick Wants to Heighten California Dam

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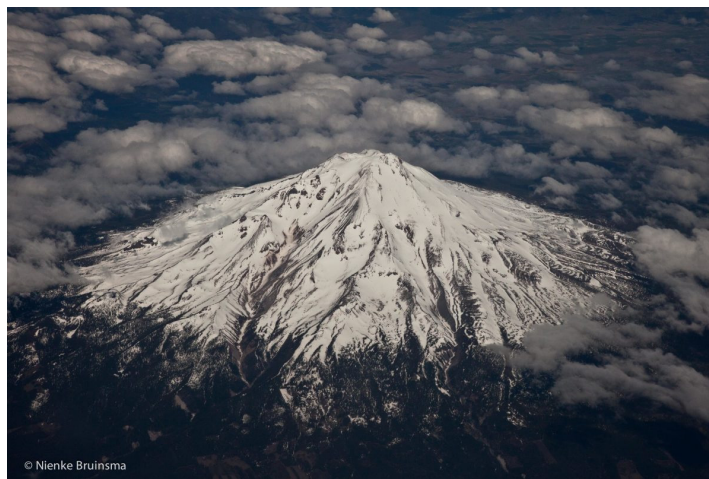
Among the controversies facing US President Donald J. Trump's Secretary of the Interior nominee, David Bernhardt, is his proposal to heighten California's Shasta Dam, which would increase the capacity of the state's largest reservoir by 630,000 acre-feet, and flood part of the McCloud River.



President Trump's pick for Secretary of the Interior wants to heighten Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet (Source: Bureau of Reclamation/Flickr)

Bernhardt began Senate his confirmation on March 28. The Senate Energy Committee voted on April 4 to send Mr. Bernhardt's nomination as Secretary of the Interior to the full Senate for a final vote. He was nominated for the position after his predecessor, Ryan Zinke, resigned last year amid mounting ethics concerns. Bernhardt could become the [second Secretary of the Interior under Trump](#) to threaten glacier landscapes and watersheds in the western US.

Glacier and snow melt from Mount Shasta, which has the most glaciers of any mountain in California, [comprise much](#) the McCloud's flow. The 47-mile river is one of four major tributaries that feed Lake Shasta, which was created with the completion of the Shasta Dam in 1945. President Trump's pick for Secretary of the Interior wants to heighten Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet.



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Mount Shasta provides much of the flow for the McCloud River, and other river in the region (Source: Nienke Bruinsma/Flickr)

State politicians, environmental groups, and native peoples in the region, particularly the [Winnemem Wintu](#), have mobilized to resist the proposal as it undergoes environmental review. They point to adverse environmental and cultural impacts as well as ethical concerns with the project.

Opponents of raising the dam cite Bernhardt's former position as a lobbyist for Westlands Water District, a Fresno-based provider of irrigation for Central Valley agriculture and a likely beneficiary of additional Shasta reservoir capacity. This week the [New York Times reported](#) that Bernhardt continued to lobby on behalf of Westlands for several months after he claimed to have discontinued lobbying activities. The US Bureau of Reclamation, an agency within the department Bernhardt would oversee, has offered to pay for half of the \$1.4 billion cost of heightening the Shasta Dam. Local and state partners are expected to foot the other half. Westlands Water District, Bernhardt's former client, is the only agency to offer funding so far.



Former Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke (left) and deputy secretary David Bernhardt (right) at Bernhardt's swearing in ceremony in August 2017 (Source: Department of the Interior/Flickr).

Bernhardt is also a former oil and gas industry lobbyist with a track record of challenging environmental regulations, including the expansion of offshore oil drilling and attempts at weakening key provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

A New York Times investigation published last week revealed Bernhardt blocked the release of a report which highlighted the threat presented by pesticides to 1,200 endangered species. Prior to his position in the Department of the Interior, Bernhardt worked to undo protections surrounding California's critically endangered [delta smelt](#). The small fish is used as an indicator species for environmental quality in the San Francisco Bay-Delta

In response to Bernhardt's nomination, more than 160 conservation groups signed a letter on March 26, urging Senators to oppose confirmation, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

On the McCloud River, endangered and threatened species are also at risk. A lawsuit attempting to block the Shasta Dam heightening project cited three species of salamander which would be imperiled on the McCloud and other rivers. According to the [California Wilderness Coalition](#), the McCloud is not protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act [*sic*], though state protection prohibits the construction of new dams on the river.

Ted Grantham, a professor of environmental science, policy and management at the University of California Berkeley, told the [Berkeley News](#), “That area is protected under state law, and the state is opposing it just for that reason. But it’s not just that. The Winnemem Wintu’s cultural influence would be impacted. And there would be repercussions for salmon, trout and salamanders. There are a lot of wrinkles that make this plan problematic.

The Winnemem Wintu are an [unrecognized Native American tribe](#) indigenous to the McCloud River watershed. Their name translates to “Middle Water People,” as the McCloud River is bounded by the Upper Sacramento to the west and the Pit River to the east. The tribe’s website reads, “We were born from water, we are of the water, and we fight to protect it.”



A Winnemem Wintu child at a ceremony in 2009 (Source: Michael Marmarou/Flickr).

The Winnemem Wintu ancestral lands were submerged in 1945, when the lower reaches of the McCloud River flooded behind the new dam. The tribe hopes to preserve the few sacred sites remaining above water. “We’re unique to that river. And that’s the only river that can make us that. And we’ve already lost a lot,” [Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk](#) said in a January 2018 scoping meeting hosted by the Westlands Water District. “The Winnemem people have nowhere else to go to become Winnemem people. We have to have that river and there’s so little of it left.”

The river is storied among fly-fishermen, who pilgrimage there to fish for rainbow and brown trout. Before Shasta Dam blocked the return of anadromous fish, the McCloud River was one of the most productive salmon and steelhead waters in the Sacramento Watershed, according to [Cal Trout](#), a non-profit steward of wild fish and rivers in the state.



Fly fishing in California's McCloud River (Source: California Department of Fish and Wildlife)

William Hagen, professor emeritus in the history department at University of California Davis, has experience fly-fishing on northern California rivers. "To raise Shasta so as to wipe out miles of riffled and white water, when so little such primal water remains, is very deplorable," Hagen told GlacierHub. "All other routes to water conservation should be taken first."

The dam-raising proposal comes at a time when many dams are being removed due to inefficiencies, ecological degradation, and coastal erosion. American Rivers, a non-profit group which advocates for protecting wild rivers, [reported](#) a record 86 dams were removed in the US in 2017, while another 82 were taken down in 2018. Significant dam removals are scheduled this year, including four hydroelectric dams on northern California's Klamath River, into which runoff flows from the glaciers on Mount Shasta's north slopes.

Due to climate change, snowpack in California is [expected to decline](#) 25 to 40 percent by 2050. While the climate trend toward less available water is encouraging water managers to increase storage capacity, reduced water availability raises questions about the efficacy of raising the dam.

"Big, new dams will not remedy California's water challenges," the National Resources Defense Council said in 2014. "The dramatic declines in snowpack and changes in streamflow timing raise serious flags about California's outdated approach to water supply storage, requiring the state to reconsider and change how new and existing reservoirs are managed."

How realistic is the dam project and its threat to the ecology and Native Americans of the McCloud? “My view is they will ultimately be stopped,” said John McManus, who heads the Golden Gate Salmon Association, to [KQED](#), “but I could be wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time.”



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<http://glacierhub.org/2019/04/09/trumps-interior-pick-wants-to-heighten-california-dam/>

FOR addendum. The McCloud River is protected under the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act from new dams and reservoirs. It is not, however, included in the California Wild & Scenic Rivers system.