

## Shasta Dam Expansion: California, Conservation Groups Sue Water District Over Plan

*By Craig Miller  
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California's attorney general says the state's Wild and Scenic Rivers Act bars any state agency from cooperating with plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam and enlarge Shasta Lake. (Craig Miller/KQED)

The battle over Shasta Dam is escalating.

This week, California's attorney general and several fishing and conservation groups filed separate lawsuits to stop a [controversial project](#) to elevate the dam and expand the state's largest reservoir, near Redding.

"This project is unlawful," wrote Attorney General Xavier Becerra in a statement announcing the state's lawsuit. "It would create significant environmental and cultural impacts for the communities and habitats surrounding the Shasta Dam."

But the plaintiffs' primary leverage point might be the McCloud River, the most [legendary trout stream](#) in California, and protected under California's [Wild & Scenic Rivers Act](#).

It's also one of several rivers feeding Shasta Lake, the shoreline of which would expand if the federal Bureau of Reclamation proceeds with its [plan to add 18 feet](#) to the top of Shasta Dam. The Bureau estimates the expansion would add 630,000 acre-feet of water to the capacity of the reservoir.

The companion suit to the state's was filed by a coalition of Friends of the River, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, Institute for Fisheries Resources, Natural Resources Defense Council, Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club and the Golden Gate Salmon Association.

### **Westlands Targeted**

Unlike multiple [environmental lawsuits](#) filed by California since Donald Trump took office, this one doesn't target the administration. Instead, both suits are aimed at [Westlands Water District](#), a Fresno-based irrigation district and a major player in Central Valley water politics. Westlands wants the additional water that a bigger Shasta Lake might provide, and it's willing to put up tens of millions in project funding to get it. But the state and other plaintiffs argue that the whole project is illegal.

"It's been illegal for 30 years," says Ron Stork, with the conservation group Friends of the River, in Sacramento. " 'It' being raising Shasta Dam and Westlands cooperating with the federal government to do that."

Stork says state law prohibits any expansion of Shasta, because it would flood a stretch of the lower McCloud, disrupting the river's natural flow. It would also inundate most remaining sacred sites of the [Winnemem Wintu tribe](#).

"There are some kind of sacred trusts that we've made as California citizens that we're going to protect some of our rivers," adds Stork, "and Westlands' actions and Reclamation's expected actions really can't stand."

Becerra agrees that as a state-sanctioned agency, Westlands is barred from any participation in the project, financial or otherwise.

On Tuesday evening, Westlands issued a statement saying it's merely exploring its options with Shasta and not violating any law.

"Contrary to the allegations by the Attorney General, the District is not violating the law," Westlands said. The district asserted it was "merely conducting environmental review" to determine whether it can move forward as a federal cost-sharing partner.

It's been widely anticipated that Westlands would provide critical funding for the expansion. The district has even bought up property surrounding Shasta Lake, presumably in anticipation of its enlargement.

Stork says no hearing date has been set for his group's case, but the battle is far from over.

The Bureau of Reclamation falls under the U.S. Department of the Interior, now headed by David Bernhardt, a former lobbyist for Westlands Water District.

<https://www.kqed.org/science/1941772/shasta-dam-expansion-california-conservation-groups-sue-water-district>



*Craig Miller is KQED's science editor, specializing in weather, climate, water & energy issues, with a little seismology thrown in just to shake things up. Prior to his current position, he launched and led the station's award-winning multimedia project, Climate Watch. Craig is also an accomplished writer/producer of television documentaries, with a focus on natural resource issues.*