

## California Sues to Sink Planned Expansion of Shasta Dam

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*NICK CAHILL*



Shasta Dam in Northern California

REDDING, Calif. (CN) – Up against the Trump administration and the nation’s largest agricultural water supplier, California’s attorney general and a coalition of fishing groups are counting on a landmark environmental law to foil a plan to increase storage at the linchpin of the Golden State’s water delivery system.

The federal government wants to raise the height of the dam at Shasta Lake in Northern California by 18.5 feet. The move would increase the capacity of what is already

California's largest reservoir by approximately 14%, creating more supplies for Central Valley farmers during wet years.

Along with a \$1.3 billion price tag, the project would cost a local Native American tribe its cultural sites.

On Monday, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra and a host of fishing and environmental groups [sued a Fresno-based water supplier](#) for cooperating with the Trump administration on a plan they claim will inundate a protected mountain river stretch and harm a renowned wild trout fishery.

"This project is unlawful. It would create significant environmental and cultural impact for the communities and habitats surrounding the Shasta Dam," said Becerra in a statement.

No stranger to suing the Trump administration over environmental issues, Becerra this time is targeting a group that stands to benefit most from the dam expansion: Westlands Water District.

Westlands owns over 3,000 acres along the protected McCloud River and is a cost-sharing partner on the project with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which operates Shasta Dam.

Becerra and the opponents claim Westlands circumvented the state's Wild and Scenic River Act by teaming up behind the scenes with the Trump administration on the project. According to the pair of lawsuits filed in Shasta County Superior Court – one by Becerra and one by environmental groups – Westlands has budgeted over \$1 million toward the project and released a shoddy environmental impact report that underestimates impacts to the trout fishery.

The opponents say Westlands' planning violates state law since the project as envisioned will muddle the currently free-flowing stretch of river.

Hoping to protect the river's status for future generations, the Legislature in 1989 brought the McCloud under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The designation prohibits new dams and diversions on 47 miles of the river that flows through the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. Much of the river's water comes from nearby Mt. Shasta and it boasts a famous wild trout fishery.

The stretch of river that would be inundated by the project includes some of the remaining land occupied by the Winnemem Wintu tribe, which lost most of its territory during the dam's construction in the 1930s. The tribe and other project opponents have accused the feds and Westlands of pursuing "ethnocide" at the behest of wealthy farmers located hundreds of miles downstream.

Proponents have been trying to raise Shasta Dam for decades, but the idea has gained steam under President Donald Trump.

On the campaign trail, Trump often promised California farmers he would increase federal water deliveries, and in March 2018 Congress approved \$20 million toward designs for the project. David Bernhardt also lobbied on behalf of Westlands before Trump tapped him as Interior secretary.

The Bureau of Reclamation hopes to begin construction on the project by 2020 and is counting on Westlands' financial support.

Westlands did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the lawsuits.

California has long opposed the idea of raising the height of Shasta Dam as its wildlife agencies believe it will turn the stretch into "reservoir habitat" when the lake is near capacity. The state also believes the 1972 Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and the federal 1992 Central Valley Project Improvement Act bar the expansion. Other issues include potential impacts to a species of endangered salamanders and the process of buying out impacted homeowners.

Environmentalists and fishing groups say the lawsuits are meant to end "Westlands' disrespect" of the McCloud.

"Californians decided to protect the McCloud River in 1989 because it's valuable to all of us. The ill-conceived dam raise would flood a free-flowing reach of the river, harm a prized fishery and destroy sacred tribal sites," said Ron Stork of Friends of the River.

Other groups involved in the lawsuit include the Sierra Club, National Resources Defense Council, Golden Gate Salmon Association and Earthjustice. The conservationists along with Becerra want a state judge to preliminarily and permanently block Westlands from further assisting on the project.

Last year the secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency sent Congress a letter asking lawmakers not to fund the project. John Laird said state law prevents taxpayer dollars from going toward the project and encouraged Congress to look at other water storage alternatives that don't involve protected rivers.

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