

# REAL LEADERS BUILD THE RESISTANCE, NOT HIGHER DAMS

BY WOODY LITTLE



## Caleen Sisk, Spiritual Leader and Tribal Chief Winnemem Wintu Tribe

Chief Sisk assumed leadership of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe in 2000. Since then, she has focused on revitalizing the tribe's cultural and religious traditions, including the Winnemem's War Dance and Puberty Ceremony. A tireless advocate for salmon restoration, undamming watersheds, and the basic human right to clean water, Chief Sisk is also a regular speaker at the United Nations on the treatment of federally unrecognized tribes in the U.S.

Entering the summer with a near-record snowpack, many Californians are ready for water to flow into our rivers and lakes and the seemingly unending threat of drought to ebb. But beneath the calm surface of Lake Shasta, the struggle for California's water future churns on. And Rose Foundation's 2019 Anthony Prize Winner, Chief Caleen Sisk of the Winnemem Wintu tribe, is in the thick of it.

Nearly two thirds of a mile long, and towering 600 feet above the Sacramento River, the Shasta Dam holds back the largest human-made lake in California. But, Donald Trump never met a wall he didn't like – his administration wants to build this ecological nightmare of a dam even higher. **The results would be disastrous.**

Built in the 1940s, the dam completely blocks the headwaters of one of the largest salmon-bearing rivers in the world, leaving winter-run Chinook salmon – named for their cold season “run” from the ocean up the Sacramento River to spawn – one of the most endangered fish species in California. The proposed 18.5 foot dam raise would threaten the few winter-run Chinook remaining downstream with temperature and water flow changes, and could inundate mine tailings and other industrial toxins surrounding Lake Shasta that would imperil a salmon restoration project in the works upstream of the dam.

Beyond major fishery impacts, the original Shasta Dam inundated most of the indigenous Winnemem Wintu's land. The dam raise would further disrupt the McCloud River, which runs into Lake Shasta, and claim much of what's left, including Puberty Rock, used for the Winnemem's coming of age ceremony. These impacts are also illegal – the dam project would violate the state Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

**But it's not just about fish and culture** – the dam raise would not really benefit the state's water supply. Environmental advocates estimate that the \$1.3 billion project might only increase the yearly capacity of the dam by about 1%. Essentially, U.S. taxpayer dollars would flow to huge corporate growers in the Westlands Water District who want to irrigate arid desert land unfit for farming. The Trump administration directs huge handouts to corporate polluters and completely disregards the law...sound familiar?

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## BUILD THE RESISTANCE *(continued from cover page)*

**Clearly, the fight against a higher Shasta Dam is about more than just 18 feet of new concrete.**

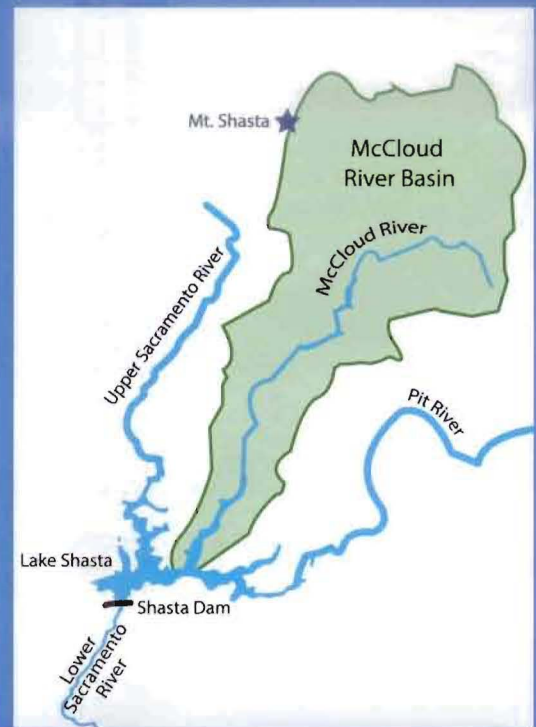
And the deeper you go in this story, the more you see why Chief Sisk is such a central figure. The Winnemem Wintu tribe has lived around the McCloud (or “Winnemem”) River for many thousands of years. According to ancestral Winnemem belief, “When we first bubbled out of our sacred spring on Mt. Shasta at the time of creation, we were helpless and unable to speak. It was salmon, the Nur, who took pity on us humans and gave us their voice. In return, we promised to always speak for them.” The McCloud once nurtured such a thriving salmon habitat that stories through the 1800s boasted of walking across the river on the fishes’ backs. So, building the Shasta Dam did not just threaten one fish species. Separating the McCloud salmon from their historic spawning grounds fundamentally undercut the Winnemem Wintu’s cultural identity.

**Caleen Sisk is fighting back.** She’s a constant advocate both inside state hearings and outside at rallies, and a tireless messenger educating the public and governmental decision makers about the threats of raising the Shasta Dam. And she is starting to win. When California Governor Jerry Brown’s Natural Resources Secretary bluntly opposed the dam raise project last July, he highlighted its illegal impacts on the McCloud River – the very impacts Chief Sisk and river activists have raised for years. After taking the helm in 2019, the Newsom Administration doubled down and joined conservation groups in court to challenge powerful Westlands Water District’s advocacy for the project.

But even without the dam raise, the once vibrant salmon runs north of the dam would stay bare. So Chief Sisk is also pushing for a swimway around the dam so that restored salmon can migrate naturally. Remarkably, while nearly extinct in the Sacramento River, a healthy population of wild McCloud Chinook salmon is thriving in New Zealand, exported from a federal fish hatchery in the 1800s. Chief Sisk is advocating and raising funds to bring these salmon – her relatives – home. One prong of this effort is her annual “Run4Salmon”: a 300 mile prayerful journey from the Delta up the Sacramento River, following the Chinook salmon’s historic migration path with forums, trainings, rallies, concerts, boating events, and literal runs.

**Let’s be clear: the fight’s not over yet.** Last year, Congress approved \$20 million in scoping funds for the dam raise, and the Trump Administration has not backed down yet. But a growing chorus of voices is joining Chief Sisk to understand that real leaders build the resistance, not a higher dam.

Keep an eye out for the annual Run4Salmon in September. Follow the Winnemem Wintu Tribe on social media for campaign updates. And most importantly, follow Chief Sisk’s example to defend the integrity of our communities and ecosystems from threats both old and new.



The Winnemem Wintu Tribe has lived in the McCloud River area, historic salmon spawning grounds, for many thousands of years.

 [www.run4salmon.org](http://www.run4salmon.org)

 [www.facebook.com/winnememwintu/](https://www.facebook.com/winnememwintu/)