

California dam-raising project favored by Trump stumbles after water agency retreats

By Dale Kasler

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Opposed by California officials, the Trump administration's [\\$1.3 billion plan to raise Shasta Dam](#) and increase reservoir storage has run into a roadblock that could delay the project or even kill it.

The state has called raising Shasta Dam a potential environmental disaster for the nearby McCloud River — and has succeeded in bottling up the project by obtaining court rulings that prevent Westlands Water District from preparing an environmental review required by state law.

Westlands, the giant farm-irrigation agency in the San Joaquin Valley, wants more storage in Shasta Lake and would be a crucial financial partner in the project with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.



[In 2018] Republicans in Congress authorized spending \$20 million to study raising Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet. If ever fully approved, the \$1.3 billion project would flood a stretch of the McCloud River, a “wild and scenic river” that’s sacred for a Native American tribe. Monday, April 16, 2018 in Shasta County, Calif

The big blow came earlier this week, when Westlands announced it was halting the environmental review. The announcement came several days after the [California Supreme Court decided against hearing Westlands’ appeal](#) of an earlier ruling that prevented the water agency from moving ahead on the study.

“It is disappointing and I don’t know whether it will be the end of it or not,” said Tom Birmingham, the general manager of Westlands. He added that Westlands hasn’t abandoned the Shasta project, however, and federal officials said they are trying to find a way to keep the project going.

Westlands’ announcement comes as feuding continues between California and the Trump administration on a range of environmental issues and other matters. The state has sued the Trump administration more than 60 times, and last week the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency [threatened to pull billions in highway funds](#) from California amid a dispute over greenhouse gas regulations.

On Monday, the federal government did [back away from a plan to pump more water](#) to farmers in the San Joaquin Valley from the ecologically fragile Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta this fall — a proposal opposed by the state. But more often than not, the two sides fight their environmental battles in court, and the Shasta Dam project has been no exception.

Raising the dam by 18.5 feet, as the federal government has proposed, would increase the storage capacity of Shasta Lake by 634,000 acre-feet, enough to fill two-thirds of Folsom Lake.

It would also back up the Shasta reservoir farther into the McCloud River, which feeds into the lake, and that's where the controversy comes in. California officials, environmentalists and members of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe say backing up the reservoir into the McCloud would harm the area's trout fishery and submerge sacred tribal sites in wet years. State officials said the plan would harm the "free-flowing condition" of the McCloud, in direct violation of the state's Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.



Tom Birmingham, general manager of the Westlands Water District stands next to a section of the McCloud River owned by the Fresno-based water district. Monday, April 16, 2018 in Shasta County, Calif.

Birmingham, though, said the impacts would be minimal, and he said state officials are mistaken when they say the project would be ruinous. "There is not a single scientific, technical, thorough analysis conducted by any department or agency of the state on how enlarging Shasta Dam ... would affect the free-flowing condition of the McCloud River or its wild trout fishery," he said.

Raising Shasta Dam has been discussed for decades. Former President Barack Obama's administration effectively shelved the project over funding issues, but the Trump administration resurrected it. Last year Congress appropriated \$20 million for pre-construction planning, although Democrats thwarted a proposal by Republicans, led by then-House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, to exempt Westlands and other farm water agencies from having to contribute money to the project.

Under federal law, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation can't raise the dam unless local water agencies such as [Westlands put up at least half the money](#). So far Westlands is the only agency that has publicly declared any interest in funding the project.

Jeff Hawk, a spokesman for the Bureau of Reclamation, which operates the dam, said "we continue to explore options" with other local agencies to pay for the project.

Environmentalists, however, hope Westlands' retreat marks the death knell for raising Shasta Dam.

“It is a setback for the project; we hope it signals to any potential cost-share partners that it's not a project worth supporting,” said Nina Robertson, a lawyer with Earth-justice, the environmental law organization that worked on the lawsuit against the project. “It violates state law and it's not a good project.”

Critics of the project have noted that Trump's Interior secretary, [David Bernhardt, is a former lobbyist for Westlands](#), which would benefit from the extra storage capacity at Shasta.

Westlands officials have said [Bernhardt had never lobbied the government](#) on the Shasta issue, and Bernhardt has denied violating any ethics rules.

The irrigation district, which sprawls over several hundred thousand acres in Fresno and Kings counties, has been pursuing the Shasta project for years. In 2007 it bought a seven-mile stretch of land along the McCloud River, including an exclusive private fishing club, for \$35 million to smooth the way for the dam raising. Birmingham was worried that developers might someday build expensive homes on the river, making the dam project almost impossible.

In July, after environmentalists and the California attorney general sued, a judge in Shasta County Superior Court halted Westlands from working on the environmental review. However, Birmingham said the water district is allowed to conduct a narrow study of whether the project would harm the river or its trout fishery.

“We now have to step back and figure out how long it will take us to prepare this analysis in the abstract,” Birmingham said. “Undoubtedly it will take some significant time.”

If the district concludes the project won't harm the river or fish, it could try again to prepare a formal environmental study. But Birmingham predicted that it would get hit again with litigation from project opponents.

Video link. See the river that would be flooded by raising Shasta Dam:

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