

Future uncertain for Shasta Dam raising after irrigation district stops work on study

Damon Arthur, Redding Record Searchlight Published 6:11 p.m. PT Sept. 30, 2019 | Updated 10:14 a.m. PT Oct. 1, 2019

Following losses in court, a Fresno-based irrigation district has backed off its plans to do an environmental study on raising the height of Shasta Dam.

The Westlands Water District announced Monday that it has stopped working on the report because it could not meet the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's schedule for the project.

The bureau is trying to get non-federal partners to help pay half the cost of the \$1.4 billion project to raise the height of the dam 18½ feet.

However, California courts at three different levels have ruled that Westlands' participation in the project is illegal. So far, Westlands is the only other agency that has publicly shown an interest in working with the bureau.

And with Democrats in Congress so far reluctant to fund the project, the dam raise faces more than just legal hurdles.

The California Attorney General's Office, as well as numerous environmental and fishing industry groups sued Westlands to stop it from working on an environmental impact report under California's Environmental Quality Act.

A Shasta County Superior Court Judge ruled this past summer that Westlands' participation violated a state law that prohibits any state agency from participating in planning for or taking part in any project that would harm the McCloud River, which flows into Lake Shasta.

The lawsuit argued the river would be harmed because raising the height of Shasta Dam could make the lake level rise in some years as much as 20 feet. That would further inundate about two-thirds of a mile of the river.



A view of Shasta Dam from the nearby overlook. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

[*Tiny salamanders could stand in the way of massive \\$1.4 billion project to raise dam*](#)

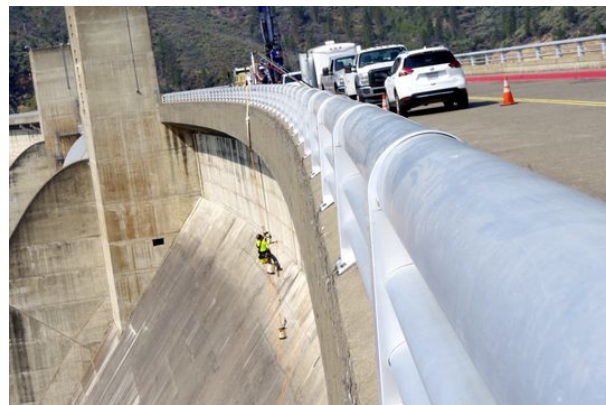
The district appealed the court's decision to the California Supreme Court, which last week rejected the district's claims.

Westlands' General Manager, Tom Birmingham, said in a statement that the district was doing an environmental study to determine if raising the height of the dam would harm the river.

[*Westlands' role in Shasta Dam-raising project takes a beating in Redding*](#)

"No agency of the State has conducted a project-specific analysis of Reclamation's proposal, to determine if enlargement of Shasta Dam would adversely affect aquatic resources — particularly those in the lower McCloud River," Birmingham said.

"Westlands took the initiative to do that assessment, through the public process established by CEQA. It is unfortunate that, as a result of the actions of the Attorney General, Westlands was enjoined from completing that analysis," he said.



Workers did testing on Shasta Dam in 2018 to determine whether it could withstand having an additional 18 1/2 feet of concrete placed on the crest of the dam. (Photo: Damon Arthur/Record Searchlight)

While no local or state agency had done an environmental review of the project, the bureau of reclamation concluded in its own environmental analysis that raising the height of the dam would further inundate two-thirds of a mile of the river.

Nina Robertson, an attorney for EarthJustice, one of the groups that sued to stop Westlands' study, said she was glad to see the district backing off its efforts to raise the dam.

"Westlands' CEQA process was unlawful and had to stop. State law broadly prohibits Westlands from providing any kind of assistance or cooperation with the ill-conceived Shasta Dam raise proposal, Robertson said.

"We are encouraged that the CEQA analysis has been suspended and we will continue to fight any and all efforts by Westlands or others to proceed with this destructive project," she said.

Outside the legal arena, the effort to raise the height of the dam also faces an uphill political battle.

[*State Supreme Court weighs in on Shasta Dam case*](#)



The McCloud River, which flows into Lake Shasta, is at the center of a dispute over raising the height of Shasta Dam. (Photo: Contributed photo by Thomas O'Keefe)

The Republican-controlled Congress set aside \$20 million in 2018 to do preliminary work on engineering plans and pre-construction work. The bureau said it also hoped to issue its first construction contracts for the project in December of this year.

However, Jeffrey Hawk, a bureau spokesman has said "the timeline is contingent on necessary congressional and statutory compliance approvals."

He also said the bureau is exploring options with several non-federal partners to pay 50 percent of the cost, but didn't say who they were.

The outlook for the project also changed after Democrats took control of Congress in November 2018.

U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Arcata, said earlier this year he opposes the project and believes Congress isn't likely to approve further funding for construction.

"You can't really justify any money for this because of this legal roadblock," Huffman said.

Even if there weren't legal issues standing in the way of the dam project, he said he would rather see other water projects built, such as Sites Reservoir in Colusa County.



More than two hundred people attended a meeting Wednesday in Redding to take comment for an environmental analysis on the effects of raising Shasta Dam. (Photo: Damon Arthur Record Searchlight)

Damon Arthur is the Record Searchlight's resources and environment reporter. He is among the first on the scene at breaking news incidents, reporting real time on Twitter at @damonarthur_RS. Damon is part of a dedicated team of journalists who investigate wrongdoing and find the unheard voices to tell the stories of the North State. He welcomes story tips at 530-225-8226 and damon.arthur@redding.com. Help local journalism thrive by subscribing today!

<https://www.redding.com/story/news/2019/09/30/westlands-water-district-stops-work-shasta-dam-study-after-court-loss/3826124002/>

FOR Addendum: A "Politico" from the same day revealed the purpose of backing off the Shasta Dam raise environmental impact report at this time:

Westlands Water District, the largest agricultural water district in the country, said it would instead perform a separate analysis of whether raising the Northern California dam would harm the McCloud River upstream, which could eventually lead to resuming environmental permitting work.