



## Big California water district pulls out of Shasta Dam expansion. Environmentalists still worry

*By Ryan Sabalow and Dale Kasler*

*November 08, 2019 12:11 PM, Updated 38 minutes ago*

The nation's largest water agency has formally backed away from a controversial plan to raise Shasta Dam, a move applauded by environmental groups that fiercely opposed the plan out of fears enlarging the state's biggest reservoir would swamp a stretch of a protected Northern California river and flood sites sacred to a Native American tribe.

With Westlands Water District officially out, the project is now on life support.

Late Thursday, the Fresno-based district signed a legal settlement with California Attorney General Xavier Becerra that [prohibits the water district](#) from working in any way on the project to raise Shasta Dam near Redding.

The project has been on the books, and highly controversial, for years. California officials say it would [violate the state's Wild and Scenic Rivers Act](#), and the Obama administration tabled the project over funding questions. But President Donald Trump's administration has [tried to move the project forward](#).

Shasta Dam holds back the state's largest reservoir. The water stored inside its 400 miles of shoreline supplies farms and cities across the Central Valley. Raising the dam 18 feet, as federal officials have proposed, would expand Shasta Lake's storage capacity by 14 percent, or 634,000 acre-feet — providing the potential for increased water deliveries to downstream agencies such as Westlands.

Under current federal law, the Bureau of Reclamation, which operates Shasta, can't raise the dam unless local water agencies contribute half the money — and so far Westlands is the only agency that has publicly said it wanted to contribute to the \$1.3 billion project.

Westlands, which serves farmers across more than a half-million acres of land in Fresno and Kings counties, had been pushing for the project for years, even spending \$35 million in 2007 to buy a seven-mile stretch of land along the McCloud River in an effort to derail any local opposition. The settlement filed Thursday specifically prohibits Westlands from buying any more real estate to make the project a reality.

Earlier this summer a judge in Shasta County Superior Court issued an injunction temporarily halting Westlands from helping plan the project. After the California

Supreme Court refused to hear Westlands' appeal in late September, Westlands signaled [it was bailing out on the project](#), announcing it was halting participation in environmental reviews.

Environmentalists said they hoped Westlands' departure would end the dam project once and for all, but weren't sure.

"Time will tell. Some of these really bad water projects ... seem to be like zombies," said John McManus of the Golden State Salmon Association. "We kill them but sometime later they seem to pop back to life." He said the project would hurt salmon runs on the Sacramento River by allowing the reservoir to hold back more water needed to prop up struggling fish populations.

Ron Stork of Friends of the River gave the dam-raising project a "50-50" chance of being dead for good.

"If Westlands chooses to drop the project, then any other water district in California could pick it up," Stork said. "But they'd face the same or similar legal thicket that Westlands did." He said it's also possible the federal government could say, "We don't need your stinkin' permits' from the state of California and just try to go it alone."

A spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation didn't immediately return a request for comment.

Westlands officials have long argued the project would cause minimal environmental harm.

A 2015 feasibility study by the U.S. Interior Department said the inundation would run 3,500 feet upriver, only about two-thirds of a mile of the lower McCloud River where it flows into Shasta Lake. The stretch of the McCloud in question also already lies between two dams, Shasta and McCloud.

The latter holds back a small reservoir 17 miles upstream from the Westlands property.

Westlands officials do acknowledge raising the dam would flood sites sacred to the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, but they contend it would only happen in the rare winters and springs when the lake is full.



*Ryan Sabalow covers environment, general news and enterprise and investigative stories for McClatchy's Western newspapers. Before joining The Bee in 2015, he was a reporter at The Auburn Journal, The Redding Record Searchlight and The Indianapolis Star.*



*Dale Kasler covers climate change, the environment, economics and the convoluted world of California water. He also covers major enterprise stories for McClatchy's Western newspapers. He joined The Bee in 1996 from the Des Moines Register and graduated from Northwestern University.*

Video Link:

<https://www.sacbee.com/news/california/water-and-drought/article210416589.html>

Story link:

<https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/environment/article237165159.html>

*FOR addendum: The proposed stipulated judgment requires Westlands to avoid certain actions – if they are in violation of the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act – that were alleged by the plaintiffs to be in violation of the Act. In previous court filings, Westlands stated its belief that its EIR had not been demonstrated to be in violation of the Act. The plaintiffs believed otherwise. It is therefore uncertain what future actions Westlands will undertake.*