

'Lame duck:' Groups bash Trump Administration report on raising the height of Shasta Dam

Damon Arthur, Redding Record Searchlight

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Visitors can see Mount Shasta in the distance over Lake Shasta and the Shasta Dam on Friday, April 24, 2020. Mathew Brannon, Record Searchlight

While Republican members of Congress praised the most recent step toward approving raising the height of Shasta Dam, fishing and environmental groups criticized it as the illegal actions of a "lame duck federal agency."

The Trump Administration last week issued its final supplemental environmental impact statement on the proposal to raise the height of the dam 18½ feet.

A press release about the action included praise from several GOP members of Congress, including representatives from the San Joaquin Valley.

"Raising Shasta Dam is critical to helping improve drought resiliency in the State of California, as it will provide more water for people, fish, and the environment," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield, in the news release.

U.S. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Richvale, and two other House Republicans also praised the action.

Federal officials have studied the height of raising Shasta Dam since the 1980s. An 18½ foot taller dam would increase storage capacity in Lake Shasta by about 14% and provide more water for agriculture, communities and the environment, federal officials said.

However, conservation and fishing groups have opposed the project for many years.

“The dam-raising approval is so patently illegal and violates so many state and federal environmental laws that we hope the new administration will quickly scuttle the Shasta project,” said Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. Federal officials want to raise the height of Shasta Dam to store more water in Lake Shasta.



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The Trump Administration said raising the dam would benefit endangered winter-run chinook salmon that spawn in the Sacramento River in the Redding area. To successfully rear their young, the salmon need cold water in the river that comes from the lower depths of Lake Shasta.

Raising the height of the dam would provide a larger pool of cold water for salmon spawning, according to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

But John McManus, president of the Golden State Salmon Association, said raising the height of the dam would actually be bad for salmon.

The salmon also occasionally need large amounts of water sent down the Sacramento River from the dam, but if the dam is raised, there would be fewer high water releases from the dam, he said.

"Raising Shasta Dam might sound like a good idea to some who don't understand that the dam has already choked much of the life out of the Sacramento River, including salmon," McManus said.

"Raising the dam would stop the highly beneficial periodic flushing and revitalizing the river gets from flood control releases," he said.

There is also the issue of the McCloud River, said John Buse, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The McCloud River is protected under state law, which says neither the state nor any other local agency can participate in water projects that would affect the free-flowing nature of the river, Buse said.

Raising the height of the dam would cause the lake level to rise and, when full, inundate about 3,500-feet of the river, according to the environmental report.



More than 200 people attended a meeting to take comment on an environmental analysis of the effects of raising the height of Shasta Dam. Damon Arthur, Record Searchlight

Federal law also requires the bureau to have a local partner to help pay for the \$1.4 billion project, Buse said.

The California Attorney General's Office and several nonprofit groups last year successfully sued the Westlands Water District of Fresno when it tried to become a local partner and began studying the environmental effects of raising the dam

The suit against the district was filed in Shasta County Superior Court. A judge ruled Westlands would be violating state law by participating in the project.

Despite the environmental report's approval, the McCloud River and local funding remain stumbling blocks to eventually raising the height of the dam, Buse said.

"They have no way of addressing that," Buse said. "They can't just sort of gloss over that in approving this environmental impact statement. There's just no way around that problem." More than 200 people attended a meeting Wednesday in Redding to take comment for an environmental analysis of the effects of raising the height of Shasta Dam.

The Trump Administration's current effort to push through a dam raise is the third in the past five years.

The Bureau of Reclamation approved an environmental report and feasibility study in 2015. The agency did not go forward with the project because it lacked a local partner to pay for half the project.

And when Westlands stepped up and began work on the project three years later, it was shut down by a lawsuit and court decision.

Despite concerns raised by conservation and fishing groups over the current push to raise the dam, U.S. Rep. Tom McClintock, a Republican who represents a district south and east of Sacramento, said approving the report was an important step for a much-needed project.

Raising the height of the dam would increase needed water storage in the state, he said.

"After decades of bureaucratic dithering and obstruction, the Shasta Dam raise is finally within sight of actual construction—an important step toward restoring water abundance to our communities," McClintock said in the administration's press release.

But the salmon association's McManus said since Trump lost the election the project isn't likely to go forward.

"This announcement looks like an example of a lame duck federal agency and its few congressional backers wasting everyone's time. The dam won't be raised," he said.

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!

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