

'Threatened by Shasta Dam raise, McCloud one of America's most endangered rivers, conservation group

Damon Arthur, Redding Record Searchlight

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

While the federal government sees the prospect of raising the height of Shasta Dam as a way to increase water storage for a thirsty California, the Winnemem Wintu of Shasta County see it as a threat to their culture.

It was a theme picked up this week by American Rivers, a conservation group that named the McCloud River one of America's 10 most endangered rivers because of the proposal to raise the height of Shasta Dam.

“Raising the height of Shasta Dam would decimate more of the McCloud River,” Ron Stork, with Friends of the River, said in a news release.

“It would destroy sacred tribal sites and harm the overall health of the river — and at a huge cost to taxpayers. Naming the McCloud one of America’s Most Endangered Rivers shines a light on this threat and also illuminates that the Biden administration should take action to protect the river,” said Stork, whose organization also works to protect rivers.

Raising the height of the dam would raise the level of the lake about 20 feet when full. It would also further inundate about a third of a mile of the McCloud River, which flows into the lake, according to tU.S. Bureau of Reclamation studies on raising the height of the dam.

Raising the height of Shasta Dam 18½ feet would increase the capacity of Lake Shasta by about 14%, the bureau says. Proponents say the extra water would provide irrigation and drinking water to communities and farms in other areas of California.

Enlarging Lake Shasta would also help endangered winter-run chinook salmon, according to the bureau. The bigger lake would mean a larger cold-water pool in the reservoir.

The colder water is sent out of the dam and into the Sacramento River where endangered winter-run chinook salmon need it for spawning in the Redding area.



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

History of the dam-raising proposal

The dam-raising idea was supported by the Trump administration, which in November issued a final supplemental environmental impact statement on the project.

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

The California Attorney General's Office and several nonprofit groups last year 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. The district agreed to pull out of the project after a judge ruled Westlands would be violating state law by participating in the project.

River proponents say raising the depth of the lake would impede the flow of the McCloud River and would violate a state law protecting the river.

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Raising the depth of the lake would also inundate more places on the lake and river that the Winnemem Wintu use for sacred ceremonies, tribal officials say.

'We've already lost so much'

The Winnemem once lived along the river, but the tribe was forced to move when Shasta Dam was built in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Gary Mulcahey, a member of the Winnemem, said the proposal to raise the height of the dam has come up several times over the past few decades. And the issue is probably going to come up again, he said.



Water is released last year from Shasta Dam into the Sacramento River. A proposal to raise the height of Shasta Dam would mean inundating part of the McCloud River. Greg Barnette/Record Searchlight file photo

He wants the Biden administration to issue a decision that would declare the dam raise project infeasible, in part because of its effect on the Winnemen.

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The chief of the tribe agreed on the dam raise's effect.

“Winnemem are unique to the McCloud River,” Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk said in a news release.

“We have a certain language that is related to those sacred sites, that is related to that river, to the things that make Winnemem people Winnemem. The McCloud is the only river that can make us that— and we’ve already lost so much. To the tribe, Shasta Dam is a weapon of mass destruction.”

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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 530-338-8834 and damon.arthur@redding.com. Help local journalism thrive by subscribing today!

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