



# California's McCloud River one of nation's most imperiled

Plan to raise the Shasta Dam poses a distinct threat to the river's health and the culture, religion and identity of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe

By **Brian Bahouth** - April 18, 2021



*The Shasta Dam created Shasta Lake in 1946 - photo: Carol M. Highsmith*

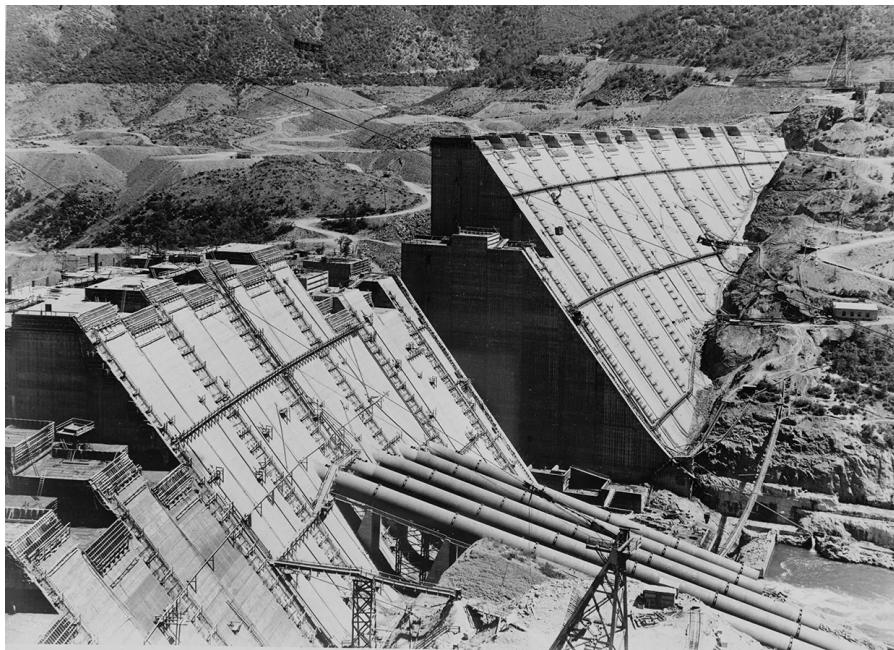
Last Tuesday, [American Rivers](#) released its annual *America's Most Endangered Rivers* list for 2021. Because of [a Trump-era proposal to raise Shasta Dam](#), the group named northern California's McCloud River as the nation's 7th most threatened river.

Over the past century, California has engineered the structure of water capture and distribution in the state. According to the California Department of Water Resources, California receives 75

percent of its rain and snow in the watersheds north of Sacramento, but 80 percent of California's water demand comes from agricultural and domestic uses in the southern part of the state.

Through the Central Valley Project (CVP) and State Water Project (SWP), California has built a renowned economy on the ability to capture and distribute water. Built in the 1940s, the Shasta Dam created Shasta Reservoir, the largest water capture and storage facility in the state in service to the CVP.

During the Trump administration, then Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt advanced plans to increase the height of Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet and to expand Shasta Lake by more than 200 billion gallons.



*Shasta Dam under construction in 1946 – photo: Library of Congress*

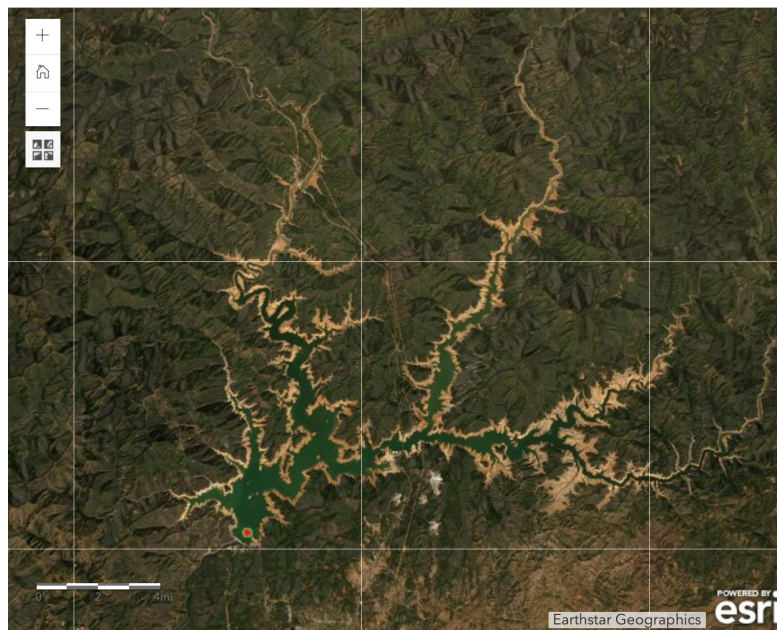
Bernhardt is a lawyer and former lobbyist for Westlands Water District. The district has long advocated for raising the dam as a way to secure more water for big Central Valley Project agricultural interests in the southern part of the state.

Worth noting, raising the dam is in direct conflict with California law, and despite the Trump-era initiative to raise the dam, the state of California has and likely would challenge the move.

In their listing of the McCloud, American Rivers and their partners are calling on the Biden Administration to overturn the Trump-era plan to raise Shasta Dam. For Amy Merrill, interim director for American Rivers' California program, there are natural ways to better manage water.

“There’s plenty of room to improve the way in which we manage our rivers, in which we manage our water that is in much better alignment with supporting our native species and our native habitats and even the natural processes for rivers, for water, for fire, for forest regeneration, than what we’re doing. There’s plenty of room there that doesn’t have to involve growing out our currently re-engineered water system.”

*In the interactive map below, the red dot marks the location of the Shasta Dam. The Upper Sacramento River, the McCloud River, and the Pit River converge in Shasta Lake.*



Merrill said rather than store more water in an expanded reservoir, the water could be banked in depleted aquifers.

“There’s a lot of room in our aquifers down in the San Joaquin and the Tulare Basin that can be used to store water that can then be used for irrigation. But we have to balance all of these things with the needs of our natural resources, of the fisheries, of migrating birds, of natural riparian systems, I mean, there’s a lot that depends on the water in California, and so we can’t channel all of it towards just one need. We have to be smarter than that, and it’s not hard. The hard part is changing our way of operating.”

Taxpayers would foot the more than \$1 billion cost of raising the dam that would flood more than 5,000 acres of forest and riverside habitat. American Rivers asserts that the move would harm the McCloud River's wild trout fishery and provide questionable benefits (if not harm) to the salmon that spawn downstream of the dam.

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



*James A. Richardson was the first recorded explorer of the Lake Shasta Caverns, a federal fisheries employee. His claim of discovery is still legible on the wall where he wrote it with carbide from his miner's lamp on November 11, 1878 – – photo: Carol M. Highsmith*

The McCloud River is home to the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, which has relied on and cared for the river for millennia. “Winnemem” means “middle water people,” referring to the river’s position between the Sacramento and Pit Rivers. The construction of Shasta Dam in 1945 devastated the Tribe’s way of life, displaced tribal members and flooded ancestral lands, burial grounds and most of the tribe’s sacred cultural sites.

The giant dam stopped salmon from returning to their spawning grounds in the heart of Winnemem territory. An additional increase of Shasta Dam’s height would severely impact the Tribe’s ability to practice their culture and religion by either permanently or seasonally flooding approximately 39 sacred sites along the McCloud River.

“Winnemem are unique to the McCloud River,” said Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk. “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.”

Chief Sisk further expounded on past events, saying, “In 1941, the U.S. government left us with nothing — no land, no homes, no salmon, no subsistence. Meanwhile, the county and state continue to get rich off taking our lands and water. We have no land on the river now. We are the undisputed indigenous people of this watershed, yet we have to continue to battle the discriminatory policies associated with being ‘unrecognized without rights of tribal status.’ We have to fight to have our ceremonies on the river. This will not only be a flooding of sacred places on the river; it is also another genocidal ordeal for the Winnemem Wintu Tribe to try to survive.”

On his first day in office, President Biden issued executive orders initiating reviews on Trump administration regulatory rollbacks. Included in this suite of reviews is the proposal to raise the height of Shasta Dam.

“American Rivers urges Department of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland to complete a swift review of this project, give full consideration to its injustice and illegality, and kill the project for good by publishing a Record of Decision that clearly states this project is illegal in California under the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act,” said Merrill.

America’s Most Endangered Rivers for 2021:

#1: Snake River (ID, WA, OR)

Threat: Four federal dams on the lower Snake River

#2: Lower Missouri River (MO, IA, NE, KS)

Threat: Outdated river management

#3: Boundary Waters (MN)

Threat: Sulfide-ore copper mining

#4: South River (GA)

Threat: Pollution due to lax enforcement

#5: Pecos River (NM)

Threat: Pollution from proposed hardrock mining

#6: Tar Creek (OK)

Threat: Pollution from Tar Creek Superfund Site

#7: McCloud River (CA)  
Threat: Raising of Shasta Dam

#8: Ipswich River (MA)  
Threat: Excessive water withdrawals

#9: Raccoon River (IA)  
Threat: Pollution from industrial agriculture and factory farming

#10: Turkey Creek (MS)  
Threat: Two major developments

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<https://www.sierranevadaally.org/2021/04/18/californias-mccloud-river-one-of-nations-most-imperiled/>