



# The Sacramento Bee



Opinion

## Climate change could force California to raise its dams but the politics are brutal

*Op Ed by Tom Philp*

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As California faces climate change and a future with bigger storms and longer droughts, the challenges before us lead to an often-asked question: Should we make some of our existing dams bigger?

That is precisely what is happening now on the American River above Sacramento. Folsom Dam and its 340-foot-tall wall of concrete has been protecting the capital from flood since 1956. It is halfway through a construction project to increase its elevation by about 3.5 feet.

Meanwhile, upstream on the Sacramento River, a possible project with very similar engineering is at Shasta Dam. A proposal to raise the 602-foot dam by another 18.5 feet has some fresh political support, with recent legislation in the House of Representatives. But decades of steadfast opposition has made raising Shasta by any amount one of the most controversial water ideas in California.

Why does raising Folsom by 1% raise no hackles while the idea of raising Shasta 3% deeply divides the water community?

The benefits and the impacts of each possible dam are very different. And so are the politics.

Raising Folsom is a life-or-death matter to help ensure that the dam never fails.

Raising Shasta is more of a balancing act of public values that pits some water benefits against environmental preservation and affected lands that are sacred to local native tribe.

Ron Stork personifies the California paradox about dams. A 34-year water warrior and senior policy advocate for the Sacramento-based Friends of the River, Stork supports the raising of Folsom Dam and opposes a similar raise of Shasta.

The Folsom raise “is a good insurance policy for the state capital,” Stork said.

But in the case of Shasta? “It is going to remain controversial and be a conflict zone,” he said.

The idea of raising Folsom Dam began to surface more than two decades ago as a previous flood protection alternative — a [large new dam](#) in the northern American River canyon near the community of Auburn — faded into history.

Floodplain interests in Sacramento concluded that it was politically impossible for Congress to approve a dam after multiple attempts. In 1999, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers and the federal Bureau of Reclamation all turned their attention to studying additional storage at Folsom and levee improvements downstream.

A single person opposed these ideas entirely because they were alternatives to the Auburn Dam. And it turns out this person was one of the most powerful members of Congress at the time, Republican John Doolittle of Rocklin.

Gridlock prevailed from 1999 into the new century, with Doolittle blocking efforts to raise Folsom Dam and construct a temporary replacement road for one that ran across the top of the dam at the time. Then Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks, of all things, began to change the politics of Folsom Dam.

After the infamous acts of terrorism on American soil, the Bureau of Reclamation forever closed the road atop the dam for security reasons. Money existed to help build a new replacement bridge as part of the project to raise the dam. Yet Doolittle tried to seek money solely to build the new bridge without additional flood protection at Folsom in the form of House Resolution 2301 in 2002.

He failed. Doolittle remained in Congress until 2009, but he could no longer stop progress at Folsom without literally causing gridlock in the area by blocking the [replacement bridge](#), which was completed in 2009.

That left one potential remaining adversary: rafters.

## **“IT’S A SENSITIVE SUBJECT**

Folsom Reservoir “is the end of the most popular white-water rafting river in the western United States,” Stork said of the American River’s south fork.

“It is a sensitive subject,” he said. “There was a dialogue over a number of years.”

Raising a dam means raising the elevation of the water level. The higher the raise of the dam, the more the standing water moves upstream. And standing water isn’t good for rafting.

In the end, this was a non-issue. The additional 3.5 feet of water behind Folsom will only happen during the peak of runoff from very large winter storm cycles and not impact rafting during drier, warmer times.

There is also a real public safety reason to make this dam slightly taller. At the moment, Folsom is not tall enough to contain the largest conceivable storm the dam is designed to protect against, an apocalyptic event known in water vernacular as the [Probable Maximum Flood](#).

Under this theoretical disaster of disasters, the peak of flood waters would flow over the top of Folsom Dam, endangering its very survival. With this slight raise, floodwaters are predicted to stay in the spillway system, protecting the infrastructure.

The raise increases the capacity of Folsom Dam by about 5%, or 50,000 acre-feet (each acre-foot is 326,000 gallons). “It is not a big increase in flood control space, but it is meaningful to the ability to regulate floods that are larger than we have ever seen on the American River,” Stork said.

[Work is now underway](#) on a [series of enlargements](#) of wing dams, an auxiliary dam and the main dam itself. Completion of the \$373 million project is scheduled for 2025. Meanwhile, at Shasta Dam, the idea of enlarging this structure has been around for decades longer than enlarging Folsom. A taller dam has its benefits.

“More water storage, more yield, plus you are going to increase the cold water (behind Shasta) for fisheries,” says proponent Jerry Meral, one of California’s true water veterans who served under both administrations of former Gov. Jerry Brown. “It’s such a winner.”

Raising Shasta also has its impacts. While state law has nothing to prevent a taller Folsom Dam to slightly encroach upstream on the American River forks, it prohibits state participation in the same project at Shasta.

The [California Legislature](#) since 1989 has prohibited any state agency or department from participating “in the planning or construction of any dam” on the McCloud River, one of three waterways behind the dam.

Raising Shasta by 18.5 feet would temporarily encroach upstream on the McCloud by more than half a mile. Which to some, in the grand scheme of things, is not a lot. To Meral, “it is more the principle of backing up water in wild rivers.”

To a local Indian tribe that is not officially recognized by the federal government, the [Winnenum Wintu](#), the McCloud is the most sacred of landscapes. The tribe has staunchly fought the dam.

“It is tough,” admits Meral.

Undeterred, Central Valley Republicans in the House of Representatives are making [another run](#) at raising Shasta. HR 215 by David Valadao (R-Hanford) seeks to break the political logjam by Congress pre-empting the state prohibition on a larger dam.

Valadao views a larger Shasta as “the most affordable, cost-efficient expansion of water infrastructure for the state of California on the table right now.”

Stork disagrees. “It is not going anywhere in the Biden administration,” he said. “It is not my job to help them write a better bill. They don’t have a clear path.”

Rare is the California water project that has no opposition, particularly the raising of an onstream dam. With Folsom as a shining example, such rarity may be what it takes for a dam raise to actually happen.

*This story was originally published August 4, 2023, 5:00 AM.*

*Video link: See the river that would be flooded by raising Shasta Dam Congress has breathed new life into a controversial proposal to raise Shasta Dam, which would flood a stretch of the McCloud River, and tribal sacred sites some years. By Ryan Sabalow*

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



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<https://www.sacbee.com/opinion/article277931878.html>