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The Proposed Shasta Dam Raise Would Continue Cultural Genocide Against the Winnemem Wintu Tribe

The McCloud River is the homeland of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe. In their native language, that name means “middle water people.” The McCloud is the middle of the three tributaries of the lower Sacramento River, along with the upper Sacramento and the Pit Rivers. The Tribe, their homeland, their river and their salmon are inseparable. Winnemem Wintu Chief Caleen Sisk has said that “whatever happens to our salmon happens to us.” The proposed raise of Shasta Dam represents a grave threat to the Tribe and important tribal resources.

Both state and federal agencies recognize the Tribe’s relationship with the McCloud River. In May of 2023, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the National Marine Fisheries Service signed agreements with the Tribe to advance efforts to return Chinook salmon to the McCloud.



Winnemem Wintu Chief Caleen Sisk with Chuck Bonham, California Department of Fish and Wildlife and Cathy Marcinkevage, National Marine Fisheries Service, at the May 2023 Signing Ceremony

Shasta Dam and the Tribe

California's genocidal gold-rush era policies towards Native people had a devastating impact on the Tribe. Those anti-Native American policies continued with the construction of Shasta Dam. Shasta Dam played a central role in the loss of Winnemem Wintu tribal land and water rights, and the loss of their salmon runs. Before the gold rush, the Tribe had over 10,000 members. Today, government policies have reduced that number to fewer than 150 tribal members and no salmon runs.

The construction of Shasta Dam would inundate much of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe's homes, traditional homeland and sacred sites. Congress recognized this impact, when it passed the Central Valley Project Indian Land Acquisition Act (CVPILAA, 55 Stat. 612), which called for the Bureau of Reclamation to compensate the Tribe for the taking of their land and to relocate tribal burials into a cemetery held in trust for the Tribe and/or the families.

The Bureau has not met the requirements of the CVPILAA. The Tribe was never compensated for the taking of their land, salmon and river. And although the Bureau did relocate some tribal burials before Shasta Dam was filled, the cemetery is not held in trust for the Tribe. In fact, it is currently held by the Bureau of Land Management who prohibits the Tribe from using their own cemetery. In late 2024, an analysis by the Bureau of Reclamations confirmed the agency's failure to compensate the Tribe and hold a cemetery in trust for the Tribe.

The Proposed Dam Raise

For years, the Westlands Water District has pushed the Bureau of Reclamation to raise Shasta Dam. That project was a top priority of the first Trump Administration. Funding for raise has been included in the budget reconciliation bill in the House Resources Committee. The raise was also included in H.R. 215 (Rep. Valadao, R, California) in the 118th Congress, which may be reintroduced in this Congress.

Virtually all the water from a raised Shasta Dam would go to the Westlands Water District, which is the largest junior water contractor of the Bureau of Reclamation's Central Valley Project. Yet Westlands is unwilling to pay the full cost of the dam raise, and with the proposed terms for the \$2 billion in the reconciliation bill, Westlands would not even be required to cost share. It is worth noting that the Bureau has no contracts that would allow it to deliver water from a raised Shasta Dam to Southern California, most of the Bay Area and other California cities.

How the Proposed Dam Raise Would Harm the Tribe

Tribal Village and Sacred Sites: The dam raise would inundate key Winnemem Wintu village sites, and sacred sites which are still used for tribal ceremonies. The dam raise would also inundate cultural gathering sites and resources including the site at which a primary ceremony is held to welcome tribal women into adulthood, which holds the primary foundation of the Winnemem Wintu Tribes beliefs and existence.

Tribal Land: The Tribe is working actively to regain tribal land on the McCloud River. The Tribe is working on an agreement to purchase the Bollibokka Fishing Club, a historical Winnemem Village site on the lower McCloud River. The return of tribal land would be the best way to fulfill the Bureau's obligations to compensate the Tribe for the taking of all their lands. A significant amount of the Bollibokka Club and the lower McCloud River would be inundated by the dam raise. Thus, the project would directly interfere with the building of a salmon volitional passage, the ability of federal agencies ability to fulfill their legal obligations, and the ability of the Tribe to secure land on their river.

Salmon Reintroduction: Since 2023, the Tribe has been working closely with state and federal agencies to return endangered winter-run Chinook salmon as well as returning McCloud Chinook from New Zealand to the McCloud River. The Tribe is a full partner in this effort, including central roles in designing and implementing the reintroduction program for all salmon runs and developing a volitional passage for full restoration of Chinook.¹ The dam raise would inundate land and portions of the river that are needed for salmon reintroduction.



In 2023, Winnemem Wintu children deposit endangered salmon eggs into a streamside incubator on the McCloud River as agency staff watch. This was the first time in 80 years Chinook salmon eggs were immersed in McCloud River water.

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-07-16/endangered-salmon-relocated-to-ancestral-waters>

Salmon and the Environment Below Shasta Dam: In most years, Shasta Dam blocks key spring Sacramento River flows that are needed to help baby salmon survive their long migration to the ocean. The rare years in which Sacramento River salmon thrive are wetter years when the Sacramento River still experiences strong spring flows. The dam raise would grab even more of the life-giving spring flows that keep Sacramento River salmon alive. The Sacramento is the only river in the world with 4 runs of Chinook salmon (the winter, spring, fall and late fall runs.) Prior to the construction of Shasta Dam, all salmon runs reached the McCloud River and it is imperative for salmon restoration to return to the McCloud River. Currently, the winter and spring runs are listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. A dam raise would threaten the survival of all salmon runs, and tribal resources, below Shasta Dam. It is imperative for salmon restoration that a “true volitional fish passage” to the McCloud River be built.

The Dam Raise is Illegal Under State Law

California state law prohibits state agencies from issuing any permits for the construction of a raise of Shasta Dam (Public Resources Code 5093.542). That law also prohibits any California water agency, including the Westlands Water District, from partnering with the Bureau to raise the dam.² The State of California has consistently opposed the dam raise, including litigation by the California Attorney General.

The Winnemem Wintu Tribe urges the California public and state and federal elected officials to oppose all efforts to raise Shasta Dam – including by opposing funding for the project in the budget reconciliation bill and by opposing a reintroduced version of H.R. 215.

For Further Information:

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² <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-becerra-secures-ruling-shasta-county-halting-westlands-water>