



Opinion

## Feds may raise the dam at this Fresno County lake. That doesn't mean they should

*Opinion by Marek Warszawski  
marekw@fresnobee.com  
January 20, 2025 05:30 AM*

Nearly 40 years ago, the creation of a federally managed recreation area centered on the Sierra Nevada's largest free-flowing river in the foothills east of Fresno required a concession to farming interests.

The establishment of the Kings River Special Management Area in 1987 assured that any new dam constructed above Pine Flat Lake needed ["the specific authority"](#) of Congress. However, the possibility of raising the existing dam at some future date was kept open.

That day may actually arrive. Contained within the Water Resources Development Act of 2024 passed by Congress and signed earlier this month by President Joe Biden is a mandate for the US Army Corps of Engineers [to fast-track a feasibility study](#) necessary for raising Pine Flat Dam.

Completed in 1954 to impound the Kings River about 25 miles east of Fresno, Pine Flat Dam stands 440 feet tall. The study will evaluate whether to make the concrete gravity dam 12 feet taller, which would add roughly 120,000 acre feet of potential storage to the reservoir's current capacity of 1 million acre feet.

Congressman Jim Costa, who has never met a dam project he didn't like, called the bill's signing as "a major victory" that is "crucial for increasing water storage capacity in the San Joaquin Valley."

"Water is the lifeblood of our farms, and this is a huge step forward in securing the resources our farmers need," Costa said in a press release. "Expediting the feasibility study to raise Pine Flat Dam is essential to ensuring our communities have reliable water for the future, especially during droughts."

You can always count on Valley politicians, Democrat and Republican, to present above-ground water storage projects in the most glowing terms. With little regard for cost, actual water yield or environmental damage.

Of course they should be working to improve the region's water resilience through the dry years and flood protection during the wet ones – especially as California sees less snow and more rain due to climate change.

Still, that doesn't mean each proposal merits an automatic green light. Not without first undergoing an extensive cost-benefit analysis.



The upper Kings River meanders through the canyons toward Pine Flat Lake east on Fresno on Wednesday, April 26, 2023. CRAIG KOHLRUSS ckohlru@fresnobee.com

## KRCD: Costs will exceed \$1 billion

The Kings River Conservation District, the [resource agency](#) that manages the watershed, has long studied [raising Pine Flat Dam](#) while simultaneously trying to raise money for the project. An information sheet on KRCD's website estimated the 12 additional feet would cost up to \$960 million – though general manager David Merritt cautioned that figure is based on 2018 dollars and would likely exceed \$1 billion in the present day.

The bill signed by Biden does not include any federal funding to engineer, design or construct the taller dam, and competition for resources will be stiff. The Pine Flat Dam raise is one of 159 feasibility studies for USACE water resources projects, including 16 in California, each of which will be competing for dollars.

“There's still a lot of work to do before it can be determined if this project is viable on a long-term basis,” Merritt said. “Cost is going to be a large piece of that puzzle.”

Besides cost, the other major factor is how much extra water an enlarged reservoir would actually yield. For every year like 2023 when dam operators were forced to

release water over the spillway, historically there have been five or six when the reservoir only partially fills.

In other words, just because a reservoir is expanded by 120,000 acre feet doesn't mean you get that much extra water on an annual basis. For southern Sierra reservoirs, the ratio is typically a small fraction.

Merritt declined to disclose the expected annual yield for the Pine Flat Dam raise based on KCRD's studies, saying the figures were out of date.

Ron Stork, senior policy director for the statewide advocacy group Friends of the River, estimated the project might result in 10,000 more acre feet per year. "Not much water," Stork said via email, "and it would be pretty expensive too!"

Something else Costa and others who wish California to go on a dam-building and -raising spree fail to mention is the practically irreversible environmental price.



The upper Kings River is experiencing massive flows from the mountain snowmelt above Kings Canyon this year, promising a banner year for whitewater rafting. CRAIG KOHLRUSS ckohlruess@fresnobee.com

## Result of 1980s environmental battle

A larger Pine Flat Lake means further encroachment into the Kings River watershed, a canyon setting so spectacular that Congress in the late 1980s created a [special management area](#) to preserve it for the public's enjoyment and the native fishery.

The agreement was the result of a lengthy fight between environmental groups and KRCB, which sought to construct [a dam at Rodgers Crossing](#) that would've formed an 11-mile long reservoir stretching nearly to the boundary of Kings Canyon National Park.



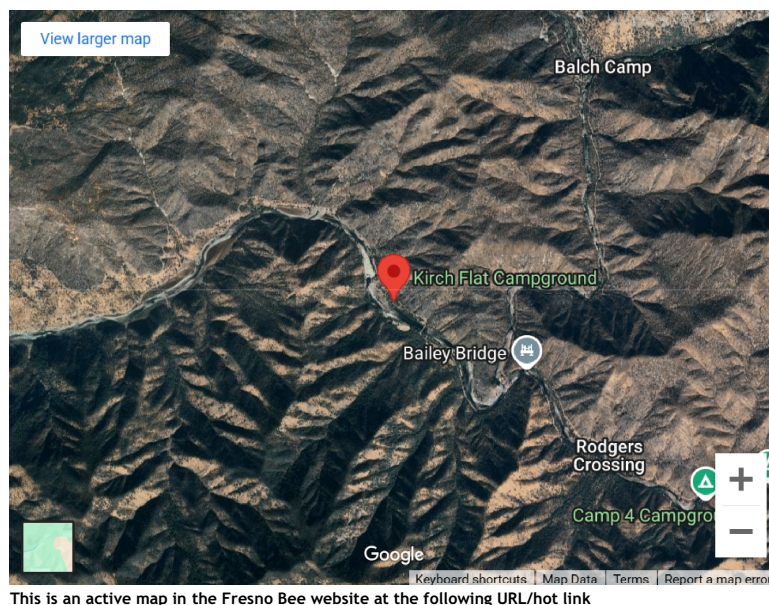
After battling for more than a decade, environmentalists (with help from Congressman Rick Lehman) managed to gain federal protections for much of the Kings River above Pine Flat, but only to where its North Fork flows in from Balch Camp. Downstream of [this confluence](#), the river was left unprotected.

Among whitewater and fly fishing enthusiasts, the Kings River is known for [a 9.5-mile stretch](#) between Garnet Dike and the Sierra National Forest campground at Kirch Flat.

Justin Butchert, the [former owner](#) of Kings River Expeditions, estimated a half-mile of whitewater would be lost if Pine Flat Lake gets expanded by 12 feet and is at full capacity. In addition, the public campground as well as KRE's Twin Pines camp and two others used by private outfitters would be inundated.

Ron Bohigian, who in 1973 founded the Committee to Save the Kings River, said he was “shocked” to hear about the fast-tracked study. He called it a “feel-good project” that won’t result in much extra water compared to the cost of raising the dam.

“That area is going to be a lot uglier because it’ll be underwater for three weeks every six or seven years,” Bohigian said.



This is an active map in the Fresno Bee website at the following URL/hot link

<https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/marek-warszawski/article298665748.html>

*Marek Warszawski: 559-441-6218, @MarekTheBee*



*Marek Warszawski writes opinion columns on news, politics, sports and quality of life issues for The Fresno Bee, where he has worked since 1998. He is a Bay Area native, a UC Davis graduate and lifelong Sierra frolicker. He welcomes discourse with readers but does not suffer fools nor trolls.*