

Environment

## A contentious project to raise California's Shasta Dam just got a funding boost from Trump

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*by Rachel Becker*  
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An aerial view of Shasta Lake and its dam in Shasta County on May 24, 2022. Photo by Andrew Innerarity, California Department of Water Resources

### IN SUMMARY

The Trump administration Tuesday announced \$40 million for "planning and preconstruction activities associated with raising Shasta Dam."

Growers urged the administration to allocate the funding, which could send more Sacramento River water to Central Valley farmers.

Opponents warned the project could harm rivers, fish and sacred sites.

Following pressure from powerful California growers, the Trump administration's Interior Department announced Tuesday that it will put \$40 million toward efforts to raise Shasta Dam – [a controversial project](#) that opponents say could swamp sacred sites and harm a protected river.

North of Redding, the 602-foot-high [dam on the Sacramento River](#) forms California's largest reservoir, storing more than 40% of the water socked away for irrigating Central Valley farmland.

The administration announced the funding for "planning and preconstruction activities associated with raising Shasta Dam", in addition to roughly half a billion dollars dedicated to rehabilitating Central Valley water-delivery canals.

Westlands Water District, the nation's largest agricultural water supplier, applauded the move, calling it a "long-overdue investment in water supply reliability." The water giant is a major player in California's \$60 billion agricultural industry, serving nearly 700 farms on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley.

Environmental groups warned that the expensive project threatens the [McCloud river](#) that flows into Lake Shasta, and [would doom efforts](#) to restore critically endangered Chinook salmon to the river. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation estimated [more than a decade ago](#) that raising the dam would cost nearly \$2 billion today, according to a federal calculator.

"It's astonishing. This is a project that would only benefit one small group of growers in California," said Barry Nelson, a senior policy analyst for the Golden State Salmon Association, referring to growers supplied by Westlands. "The project is a disaster. It is prohibited by state law. So it will be interesting to see how the state of California responds to this."

Raising Shasta dam would also swallow what remains of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe's homeland. The tribe lost 90% of its historic and sacred sites at the reservoir's construction in the 1940s, [said](#) Gary Mulcahy, government liaison for the tribe.

If the reservoir were expanded, all of it would be lost - a sacred pool, the rocks used for cultural teachings and coming-of-age ceremonies, the burial site for a massacre at Kabyai Creek.

Still, Mulcahy was skeptical that the funding announcement will move the project forward; between inflation and other construction cost increases in recent years, he called \$40 million "not even a drop in the bucket" of what's needed to raise the dam.

He said he expects federal staff cuts and other losses under the Trump administration to stymie any major infrastructure projects before they start.

"Throw \$40 million away," Mulcahy said. "They do not have the personnel, one way or the other, to even complete a planning process."

## A long-running fight

California tried to block this project before – and it didn't stick.

For decades, the [California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act](#) has barred any state agency or "agency of the state" – such as a water district – from [assisting or cooperating](#) with federal, state, or local government efforts to expand Shasta reservoir in any way "that could have an adverse effect on the free-flowing condition of the McCloud River, or on its wild trout fishery."

But the first Trump administration pushed environmental planning efforts forward anyway under Interior Secretary David Bernhardt – a former Westlands lobbyist. Congress approved [\\$20 million in funding](#).

California sued and [secured a settlement](#) against [Westlands Water District](#), which then-Attorney General Xavier Becerra said was "taking unlawful action" to assist in dam raise efforts.

But the push for a bigger dam never stopped. In February, growers – including those served by Westlands Water District – wrote to President Trump, urging him to direct funding from his One Big Beautiful Bill Act to raise Shasta Dam.

"You will meet a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver the water storage our communities desperately need and create economic stability for the farms, workers, and rural communities in the Central Valley," the letter said.

Raising the dam, the Trump administration said, would increase the [4.5 million acre-foot reservoir's](#) capacity by around 14%. That's enough to supply 2.5 million people for a year, the administration said – though the federally-managed Central Valley Project delivers [most of the water](#) from Lake Shasta to farms.

Nelson said the federal government's framing is wildly misleading: California actually has to have the water to fill the reservoir – which in this state is never guaranteed.

Rather than vow to fight back, California Gov. Gavin Newsom took the opportunity to plug another long-delayed and [deeply controversial water storage project](#) on the

Sacramento River, Sites reservoir, and urged the Trump administration to help pay for it.

"Let's not get distracted by conceptual projects, years from viability. Let's get Sites Reservoir built," said spokesperson Tara Gallegos. "Our state is already a significant investor in the project, and the federal government should join us in ensuring this project comes to fruition."



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