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Shasta Dam expansion plan: Flood of concerns

Anglers, Wintu fear Shasta Dam raising will drown treasured sites

By [Dylan Darling](#) Monday, February 19, 2007

MCCLOUD RIVER — The nation's largest water district is now in the private fly-fishing club business.

But Westlands Water District's \$35 million purchase of the Bollibokka Fishing Club and almost 3,000 acres of pristine wilderness along a seven-mile stretch of the McCloud River just north of Lake Shasta has nothing to do with rods and reels and everything to do with crops in the San Joaquin Valley and raising Shasta Dam.

"We did not want to see the use of this land to be changed to impede the potential of raising the dam," said Tom Birmingham, general manager for Westlands, a Fresno-based district that counts more than 700 farms as members and covers more than 600,000 acres in western Fresno and Kings counties.

The Bureau of Reclamation has been studying the possibility of raising the dam since 1980 and expects to have a feasibility report complete next year that will detail whether the dam, and Lake Shasta, will be going up.

Ahead of the wave

While the bureau is looking at possibly raising the dam 6_ feet to 18_ feet, the dam's base could support a raise of up to 200 feet. Tourists often hear that when they visit the dam, which was built between 1938 and 1945. The original plans called for an 800-foot dam, but the lack of supplies and labor cut it to 602 feet.

Boosting the dam by 18 feet would raise Lake Shasta, turning more of McCloud River into reservoir. The new shoreline would extend about 3,500 feet, or two-thirds of a mile, upriver.

Birmingham said Westlands bought the extra 6-1/3 miles of McCloud shoreline to make room for a potential dam raise of more than 18 feet, perhaps as much as 200 feet.

A 200-foot raise would flood much of the land and it could be a long way off, but Westlands is now ready if the call to add to the dam is made.

“I’m confident it will take years, if not decades, before a decision is done to raise the dam,” Birmingham said.

As the state’s population, and its thirst for water for agriculture, cities and environmental preserves, continues to grow, the search is on for more water storage, Birmingham said. Lake Shasta often tops the list of potential projects because of the vast amount of water that boosting the dam could bring. Along with added water storage, the increased lake would provide more flood control, cold water for salmon and hydropower production.

A 6-foot raise would increase storage space in Lake Shasta by 290,000 acre-feet, enough water to supply about 1.1 million people for a year. An 18-foot increase would boost storage by 636,000 acre-feet, enough for about 2.5 million people for a year. A 200-foot raise would increase storage by 14 million acre-feet, quadrupling the current capacity. The increase could provide a year’s water for an additional 56 million people.

Westlands favors raising the dam because it would be one of the most cost-effective ways to increase water supply for the state. The Bureau of Reclamation estimates the cost of raising the dam 200 feet at \$6 billion — a price that, at least for now, rules out that possibility, said Donna Garcia, who is heading the bureau’s study of Shasta Dam.

Added costs

The costs of raising a dam aren’t just financial. The higher waters would wash away a long-sheltered trout fishery and American Indian cultural sites along the McCloud River, say opponents to Westlands’ purchase of the land and the idea of raising the dam.

“Raising Shasta Dam is not a way to solve California’s water supply problems,”

said Jack Trout, a fly-fishing guide who says the stretch of McCloud now owned by Westlands is one of his favorite places in the world to drop his line in the water.

He said the focus should be pulling salt out of seawater to make drinking water and other alternatives to making reservoirs.

“I don’t want to see them take another inch of river,” he said.

He’s talking especially about the McCloud, and the stretch that has been home to the Bollibokka Fishing Club since it was founded in 1904 by members of the Hills family of San Francisco. That’s the same family that founded the Hills Bros. Coffee dynasty.

The club has 33 members and a rustic lodge, stone-walled house and cabin, said Leighton Hills, an heir of the Hills family who ran the club before it was sold.

Fishing season runs from the end of April until mid-November. The Hills put the club and the surrounding land up for sale in September with an asking price of \$30 million. More than 20 people, including “movie-star types” and entrepreneurs were interested in the property, with many submitting offers, he said.

Westlands was the high bidder, going \$5 million over the asking price and paying more than \$11,000 per acre.

“They seemed to want it most,” Leighton Hills said.

Trout is angry about the deal, which closed Jan. 12, and his anger simmers on his blog, where he calls Hills a “coward,” “creep,” “liar” and “dark soul.”

“He really sold us out,” Trout said.

Members of the Winnemem Wintu, a tribe not recognized by the federal government, said Hills also failed to take into account their cultural sites on the land and along the river. Bollibokka is Wintu for “black manzanita,” a bush that grows in abundance along the McCloud.

The 3,000 acres are home to 26 sites that are sacred to the Winnemem Wintu, said Caleen Sisk-Franco, chief and spiritual leader of the 130-member tribe. She said the tribe wants recognition from the federal government, not for the attendant

financial gains, but so it can better protect the sites and prevent the dam from being raised.

“We don’t want the American dream. We don’t want casinos,” Sisk-Franco said. “We want our prayer rocks.”

In 2004, the tribe held a ceremonial war dance — their first since 1887 — to protest the federal government’s consideration of raising the dam. The dance was held at the dam.

While he said he doesn’t know if there are any cultural sites on the property, Birmingham said he is aware of Wintu ceremonies taking place there and that the ceremonies will be allowed to continue.

But Sisk-Franco said it will be hard to perform the ceremonies if the river rocks that are crucial to them are under water.

Still fishing

For now, fishing will continue at Bollibokka. The club’s caretaker, who lives there year-round, now works for Westlands and will continue the upkeep of the club. Any raise of Shasta Dam, and Lake Shasta, is still on the drawing board.

And while Birmingham said Westlands bought the 3,000 acres to preserve the status quo, the consequences brought by the ownership change are still being gauged by those who want keep the McCloud free-flowing along the seven-mile stretch north of Lake Shasta’s McCloud arm.

“We are looking at how you fight the Darth Vader of rivers,” Sisk-Franco said.

SIDEBAR:

River interests

The Bollibokka Fishing Club on the McCloud River north of Lake Shasta is now owned by Fresno-based Westlands Water District. Here’s a look at the district, the club and the American Indian tribe opposed to the sale.

- **Westlands Water District** — The nation’s largest water district has more than 700 farmers and 600,000 acres. Its farmers grow more than 60 different crops, from tomatoes

and asparagus to melons and pistachios.

- **Bolibokka Fishing Club** — Established in 1904 by the founders of Hills Bros. Coffee. The club reserves seven miles along McCloud River for its 33 members and their friends. The lodge, which sleeps 14 people, costs \$6,200 for a week.

- **Winnemem Wintu** — American Indian tribe whose name means “middle river people.” The tribe isn’t recognized by the federal government, and although the leaders say it is looking into getting recognition, the Bureau of Indian Affairs says there isn’t a formal effort under way. The tribe’s leaders oppose Westlands’ purchase of the club.

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