

Redding Record Searchlight

EDITORIAL: Raise the dam? Government is looking serious

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Heck, maybe this time they mean it.

Congress first told the Bureau of Reclamation to study raising the height of Shasta Dam in 1980, and after 24 years and \$5 million the bureau is still studying the issue.

But the relentless pressure of California's growing population -- from less than 24 million in 1980 to about 36 million today -- is adding new urgency to efforts to improve the state's water supply.

The House of Representatives last month gave the lake expansion a push forward when it approved a bill authorizing the CalFed network of water projects.

The bill only pays for further feasibility studies -- you'd think they'd have the answers they need by now -- but it represents a declaration that California's congressional delegation is serious about new water storage.

In addition to adding to Shasta Dam, potential pieces of the puzzle include diverting Sacramento River water into an off-channel reservoir near Sites, in Colusa County, and building a dam on the upper San Joaquin River northeast of Fresno.

Shasta Dam is likely to be the first of these projects, and a tentative timeline at a workshop last week in Redding said construction could begin in 2011. Given the countless environmental regulations that must be met in building a major dam, it is considerably easier to expand an existing reservoir.

That doesn't mean it will be painless. While a onetime proposal to add as much as 200 feet to the dam would be far too costly and is no longer under serious consideration, even an extra 6 to 18 feet would be a complicated affair.

Lakeshore Drive must be rerouted, property owners must be compensated, state protections on the free-flowing portion of the McCloud River must be bypassed, and American Indian complaints about losing traditional sacred places allayed.

Many lake watchers are skeptical that Reclamation even needs a bigger dam, since Lake Shasta is rarely full anyway. They argue that better management of the reservoir would increase the water supply and, as a bonus, maintain higher lake levels for the benefit of recreation-oriented businesses.

There is an allure to this line of thinking and, of course, we hope the dam operators are always studying ways to run the reservoir more efficiently. Still, the basic problem is that in the spring the Bureau of Reclamation needs both to store water and to provide itself a buffer to prevent catastrophic flooding in case of rapid snowmelts or heavy late rains. If the safe zone is 20 feet from the top, raising the height of the dam will raise that safe zone and allow more storage.

The additional 290,000 to 636,000 acre-feet behind a higher dam could not only slake the thirst of up to 2.5 million Californians, but also help endangered fish.

Bureau of Reclamation officials say a deeper Lake Shasta would give them more cold water to send down the Sacramento River, improving conditions for salmon, and of course more reliable water supplies help humans and wildlife alike in dry years.

There's a great irony there. The construction of Keswick and Shasta dams, for all their benefits, irredeemably cut off a wide swath of spawning habitat from the sea.

Dams are the death of salmon, but a bigger dam could help keep the limping Sacramento runs alive.

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