

Redding Record Searchlight

Raising dam faces obstacles Residents attend workshop to air frustrations

By Alex Breitler, Record Searchlight

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Officials have already spent \$5 million deciding whether to raise Shasta Dam.

But their studies are nowhere near complete, government experts said during a public workshop held Wednesday at the Redding Convention Center.

In fact, it could be 2011 before construction begins. And that's only if the Bureau of Reclamation deems enlarging the dam a worthwhile endeavor -- and if Congress agrees.
Raising the dam

The project—now pegged at roughly \$300 million—has been tossed about for two decades as a way to store more water for the state's burgeoning population and provide cooler downstream flows for struggling salmon. Some of the bureau's options propose raising the 602-foot-high dam by 6 1/2 feet.

But some residents who attended Wednesday's workshop made it clear they'd like to see the project stopped now.

"You can raise the dam all you want, but if you guys don't do a better job of managing water, we've spent a whole lot of money on a whole lot of nothing," said Chris Veal, a retiree who owns a cabin near Lake Shasta.

Veal points to this spring as an example. Heavy rains pushed the lake to within 10 feet or so of its brim in February, and officials jacked up releases from the dam to make sure there was room to catch more rainwater in the spring.

That rain never came.

Now the lake is 30 feet down from where it was at this time last year.

"It's a tough one," said Merritt Rice, a Sacramento consultant for the bureau.

The Bureau of Reclamation is studying whether to raise Shasta Dam.

A 6 1/2-foot boost would increase storage space in Lake Shasta by 290,000 acre-feet, enough water for about 1.1 million people for one year.

An 18 1/2-foot boost would increase storage by 636,000 acre-feet, enough water for about 2.5 million people for one year.

The bureau doesn't know whether the extra water would be used for homes, farms or other purposes.

Although the lake is rarely full, raising the dam by the height of a lanky basketball player would allow officials to keep lake levels higher by the same amount, Rice said.

That 6 1/2-foot increase would be enough to provide 290,000 acre-feet of additional water in the lake. That's enough water for more than a million people in a year, although officials don't know who would actually get that water.

Other options call for raising the dam 18 1/2 feet. Anything more than that would cost a great deal and require homes or businesses to be moved.

As it is now, the bureau's favored plans require strengthening the Interstate 5 Pit River Bridge, building dikes to protect the freeway and Union Pacific tracks, and relocating Lakeshore Drive along the Sacramento River arm of the lake. Several marinas would also need modifications.

Planning documents provided by the bureau don't address how the enlargement might affect recreation. The project is intended to help fish and water supplies, with secondary goals of ecosystem restoration, reducing flood damage and providing more hydropower.

Some American Indians charge that the bureau hasn't considered their concerns.

Cecelia Silvas of the Illmawi band of Pit River Indians said Lake Shasta already has inundated sacred tribal grounds and villages. She demanded more cultural resources management and surveying.

"I think a lot of people are going to be hurt," she said.

Construction could take about four years to complete. It probably wouldn't require beefing up the base of the dam, but adding onto the top, documents show.

Officials aren't studying the lake alone. They're examining how raising the dam might affect rivers and streams that feed into it, as well as the Sacramento River downstream.

"Shasta can't just operate in a vacuum," said Rice, the consultant. "It has to be operated with all sorts of issues downstream. Put it all together, and it's very complicated."

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