

Redding Record Searchlight

SPEAK YOUR PIECE: Raising dam jeopardizes tribe's survival

By Caleen Sisk-Franco
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Both your Aug. 15 editorial and Aug. 12 story about the recent hearing on the possible raising of Shasta Dam rightly point to widespread skepticism and local opposition to the scheme to send more water to Southern California. After many years and millions of dollars spent on studies, the Winnemem Wintu believe it would have been wise to spend more research money investigating more efficient use of the water already stored behind the dam.

I lead the Winnemem Wintu tribe. We are people who identify ourselves by the same name given to our ancestral homeland -- winnemem or "middle water" -- that is now known as the McCloud River. Many of our old villages, burial grounds and sacred ceremonial sites were flooded and forever lost to us when Shasta Dam was first built. Those few sacred places that remain are an integral part of our daily lives as we visit them to gather medicinal plants, to pray, and to conduct initiation ceremonies for our young men and women.

In 1937, Congress initiated, and in 1941 finally approved, Central Valley Project legislation authorizing the government to acquire Indian lands that would be flooded by Shasta Dam. Funds "for the acquisition of other lands" represented a promise by the government to compensate us for the 4,000-plus acres of allotment land the Winnemem people lost to the lake, and to provide a cemetery for the relocation of 183 burials (including my great grandparents).

Though a cemetery now exists in Shasta Lake, the government broke the promise to compensate us with 4,000 acres of similar land and has also wrongfully denied us status as a federally recognized tribe. Raising the dam would result in the second flooding of what remains of our ancestral homeland by a government that fails to keep its promises.

These "American Indian complaints" you refer to in your editorial are not easily "allayed." This is a serious matter of the survival of our people, and our children's ability to pass their religion on to their children. Raising the dam and flooding our sacred sites is akin to the flooding of the Vatican, which you could hardly expect Catholics to sit idly by and allow to happen.

We will oppose the raising of Shasta Dam with all of our strength. Instead, we look forward to the day when the dam is removed and the salmon can spawn again in the Winnemem.

We call on the citizens of Redding to join us and oppose the raising of Shasta Dam.

Caleen Sisk-Franco is the spiritual leader and tribal chief of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe.

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