



File photo

FUTURE OF DAM IN QUESTION: A storm in 1995 caused the Matilija Dam in the county's unincorporated area near Ojai to overflow.

Decision will take time and money

By Elton Gallegly

Five decades ago, a majority of the Ventura community voted to build Matilija Dam as a way to control floods downstream and provide a water supply for the Ojai Valley.

In the process, the steelhead trout's habitat was destroyed and sand that should have flowed downstream to shore up our beaches was trapped. Today, the dam is useless. Now, as a community, we need to decide if it should come down.

On the surface, it would seem a common-sense decision: The dam is useless, so tear it down.

However, if we've learned anything from the decision to build the dam, it's that hasty decisions have unintended consequences. We need to make sure that tearing down the dam doesn't create other ecological problems.

We've embarked, instead, on a prudent course, one that will provide us with a careful analysis of the costs — in both monetary and environmental terms.

Patience is often required to make correct decisions, and this decision is no exception. It will take several years and millions of dollars to obtain a full analysis of the pros and cons of removing the dam.

In January, we took the first step. I asked Rep. Bud Shuster, chairman of the House Committee on Transportation, to consider a resolution advising the Army Corps of Engineers to study the project. On April 15, the committee adopted that resolution.

The committee's resolution authorizes me to ask another committee to fund the study. With Congress looking at every avenue available to tighten the budget, I am working diligently trying to convince my colleagues that this is a priority.

It is important to note that cost will continue to be the major obstacle throughout the process — not only to the federal government but to local agencies as well. The entire procedure is estimated at this early point to cost from \$75 million to \$150

million. The federal government would only foot a portion of that bill. The county or some other local entity will have to shoulder the rest.

At any time during the process, Congress or local officials may decide the benefits of removing the dam do not warrant the costs — either monetarily or environmentally. That is the key. We must prove that it is better to take the dam down than to leave it be.

The first study will determine whether or not the project is physically achievable. Do we have the engineering knowledge and ability to solve the problem? It will also determine if the Ventura County community is willing to pay half the cost of a much more detailed study and all the necessary environmental documentation. That additional study is now estimated to cost from \$4 million to \$6 million.

The second study could take two to three years to complete, depending on the extent and complexity of the issues and the

funding allocated by Congress and the county. It will look at such issues as potential flood damage from the dam's removal, assigning a cost to the anticipated damage, and comparing that cost to the price of removing the dam.

It will also estimate the value of creating an increased habitat for steelhead trout and other plant and animal species in the area, among other issues.

In short, that report will tell us if the dam should come down. Congress and Ventura County officials then will have to decide how to pay for the multimillion-dollar demolition and rehabilitation project.

We've embarked on a process that will tell us how to solve a problem generated in the 1940s. It's a long, costly process because it needs to be if we are not to repeat the mistakes we made back then. In the end, I am convinced we will make the best decision.

— Elton Gallegly of Simi Valley represents the 23rd Congressional District.

V.C. will explore options

By Kathy I. Long

Matilija Dam and its watershed are located within the 3rd Supervisorial District, and the downstream flood plain, communities, beaches and public facilities are within the 1st Supervisorial District. Because of this, Supervisor Susan Lacey and I have been appointed by the Board of Supervisors to coordinate the county's efforts with the appropriate federal agencies to commission a study for the removal of the dam.

Matilija Dam is located in the Los Padres National Forest, five miles northwest of Ojai. It was built in the 1940s as part of the Ventura River flood control system and as a water source for the Ojai Valley. However, the dam is now nearly useless due to the accumulation of silt in the reservoir. The original storage capacity of 7,000 acre-feet has been reduced to about 500 acre-feet.

The decommissioning of Matilija Dam has been proposed by a diverse group of interests, including surfers, fishermen, environmentalists and local politicians. The partial or complete removal of the dam would represent a very ambitious and expensive endeavor. It will involve and affect many agencies including federal, state and local governments.

What are the potential benefit of removing the dam? Of primary importance is replenishment of sand to our beaches. Removal of the dam would release millions of cubic feet of trapped silt to resume its natural flow downstream to the ocean.

I am a member of Beach Erosion Authority for Control Operations and Nourishment, an B.E.A.C.O.N. has been concerned about beach erosion since 1986 when it was formed. The downstream flow of sand coming from the Ventura River is nature's way of replenishing sand lost to erosion along the beaches south of the Ventura River.

Matilija Dam has outlived its purpose

By Alasdair Coyne

The original engineers who built Matilija Dam in the upper reaches of the Ventura River watershed between 1946 and 1948 were concerned with the problem of flood control and water supply on the Ventura River and in the Ojai Valley. They might be surprised to learn about the growing support throughout Ventura County and beyond, only 50 years later, for decommissioning and demolishing their solution to these problems.

As Matilija Dam has become filled with sand and gravel, during the five short decades, Ventura County's beaches have retreated as much as 100 feet. It has been estimated that the sediment behind Matilija Dam could increase the width of those beaches by 30 feet, thus preventing potentially tens of millions of dollars of property damage from coastal erosion.

It has also become clear that the annual southern steelhead run in the Ventura River, estimated to number nearly 6,000 as recently as 1946, has dwindled to a fraction of its former size.

Ed Henke and other lifelong

fishermen who grew up in Ventura remember catching steelhead during lunch breaks from school, through the 1940s. Large dams block the steelhead's access to their prime spawning grounds like Matilija Creek in the upper watershed. The removal of Matilija Dam will reopen access to more than 20 miles of steelhead spawning and rearing habitat in the three upper forks of Matilija Creek.

Originally towering nearly 200 feet above the creekbed, portions of the topmost sections of Matilija Dam were removed in two stages, in 1965 and 1977, because of poor-quality concrete used in the dam's construction.

In 2009, management and maintenance of the dam will revert to Ventura County. What to do with an aging, sediment-filled monolith with no remaining water-storage or flood control capacity has become a question of critical interest to county officials, as well as beach property owners and steelhead advocates.

At a round-table discussion on decommissioning and removing Matilija Dam, held on May 3 at the Ventura County Government Center, a wide range of stakeholders expressed their

support for a reconnaissance study of how to tackle the project. Congressman Elton Gallegly is seeking federal funding for this study and has also approached the Army Corps of Engineers for assistance.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt has expressed strong support for the removal of dams that will help to restore access to prime spawning grounds for federally listed endangered species such as the southern steelhead.

The removal of Matilija Dam will not be accomplished as quickly as its construction, but with consensus among the stakeholders, the initial study and the project itself could move forward before next year.

Removing the concrete dam itself is fairly straightforward, but dealing safely with the estimated 4 million to 6 million cubic yards of sediment behind the dam is more complex.

Two possible approaches have been outlined by Dr. John Gray of URS Greiner Woodward-Clyde, a consulting firm. One option would allow winter rains and natural erosion to carry the sediment downstream. But the major storm events that normally carry massive quantities of

eroded sediment down to our ocean beaches are unpredictable.

Difficulties could arise if large amounts of material were deposited along flood-prone stretches of the lower Ventura River, clogging the channel and causing overtopping of its banks.

The safer, but more expensive, option would use a 10-inch diameter slurry pipeline to send a mixture of sediment and water 18 miles down river to the ocean. Preliminary estimates indicate that it might be possible to pipe a million cubic yards of sediment a year in this manner, thus removing most of Matilija Dam's sediment deposits in as few as five years.

Several small dams have been removed around the nation in the past few years. But none has approached the size of Matilija Dam. Ventura County has a rare opportunity to participate in a historic restoration effort. As other dams across the nation near the end of their useful lives, the lessons learned here will be important steppingstones in our understanding of dam removal and river restoration.

— Alasdair Coyne of Ojai is the conservation director of the Keep Sespe Wild Committee

Another potential benefit is the return of steelhead trout. The dam blocks trout migration to the upper part of Matilija Creek, a prime spawning stream. But do we need to completely remove the dam to accomplish this? Could the dam be safely lowered and a fish ladder installed to provide safe upstream and downstream passage of the steelhead? These options need to be thoroughly evaluated.

The potential risks of removing the dam include the possibility of increased flooding downstream due to a raised channel bed, obstruction of tributary flows, or creation of in-channel sandbars because of increased movement of sediment. This is a critical issue because of the close proximity of homes and other structures along the river. This potential risk also needs to be part of the evaluation.

There are other possible environmental impacts that need to be studied, including water quality and effects on other aquatic species. Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley, is seeking funding for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reconnaissance to determine if this project can be done.

Beach erosion and the protection of endangered species could help to qualify this project for partial federal funding. A feasibility study must also be done to determine the scope and approach to dam removal and availability of funding sources to provide the required local match for future phases of the project.

There must be a clear understanding of the benefits of the removal of the dam, and there must be assurances that it can be accomplished in a safe, cost-effective and environmentally sound manner that takes into account all issues of public safety, property rights and the wise use of public funds.

I support the removal of the dam and, along with Supervisor Lacey, will work aggressively to develop the strategy, identify options and secure federal support and funding.

— Kathy J. Long is a Ventura County supervisor, representing the 3rd district.

Leave the dam alone

Matilija Dam should not be removed. Nature has been known to produce landslides by earthquakes or "natural" earth slippage.

If one of these had occurred in the Matilija Dam area, would we, being "nature lovers," require government to go in and remove the natural landslide that created a natural lake behind the earthen dam?

The concrete dam that is now there should be left and allowed to silt up and produce a meadow. The steelhead trout expansion would be minimal with the dam removal, because there is not much area above the dam to promote their expansion.

— Cliff Dysart,
Oak Park

Tough decision

The proposed removal of Matilija Dam is a busy topic these days. No one in the canyon shares the same opinion on the subject because it is so deeply personal, with a lot of different reasons, pro and con, toward the idea. So, to put things into perspective, this is my opinion, which does not reflect anyone else's in the canyon.

Personally, I think the dam has seen better days and served a minimal function in its current state with its limited capacity. Over the years, it has caused the creek bottom to rise, and the water flow to back up.

This may place some homes in danger and some may have already been lost due to these changing conditions.

These are just a few problems that may be

resolved by the removal. On the other hand, the lake/reservoir is very scenic with a variety of wildlife, and is a useful source of emergency water for firefighting in the canyon and other locations near the radius of the lake.

So, you can imagine the complexity this proposal presents and how it may have dramatic effects on the residents of Matilija Canyon.

Personally, I am for the removal of the dam because it would return the canyon and the creek to their natural state and, after living here for more than a decade, I have learned not to try to control nature.

Nature usually puts me in my place in the great scheme of things.

— Carl Ebersole,
Matilija Canyon