Task Force to Examine Dam Removal

By CATHERINE SAILLANT
TICK STAFF WRITER

Saying it would bring wide, sandy beaches to much of Ventura County and would protect threatened fish, dozens of environmentalists, scientists and officials from federal, state and local agencies met Monday to hash out a proposal to dismantle Matilija Dam.

After hearing from a panel of experts, the 60 participants agreed to name a task force to answer several critical questions:

Chief among them is: Who would pay for such a massive and costly project?

While early estimates have been as high as $2 billion, the true cost is unknown and would depend on the process chosen to bring the dam down, panel members said.

While some argue that the dam would remain in place, others believe it should be removed.

Task Force members agreed that the dam must be removed to allow for beach revitalization.

Environmentalists are concerned the concrete wall acts as a 146-foot-tall barrier to endangered southern steelhead trout trying to reach 20 miles of prime spawning streams in Matilija Creek.

The daughter encroaching trees used to migrate up the Ventura River by the thousands. But after the dam was built, their population declined so much that the powerful swimmer has not been spotted in the Ventura River for years, said Sam Chubb, a U.S. Forest Service biologist.

If the dam were dismantled, the population probably would rebound to about 2,000 adult steelhead, Chubb said Monday's group.

Removal would also allow sandy sediments to flow down the Ventura River and into the ocean, said Jerry Nowak, executive director of a beach erosion awareness group.

Beaches from Ventura to Point Mugu probably would widen by 30 feet, a process that would take several years, Nowak said. Probing sediments would also eliminate erosion on the bike path at Surfer's Point in Ventura, a concern that the city has been working to solve for years.

John Gray, an engineering consultant, outlined methods for removing the dam. The easy part is taking down the concrete wall, Gray said. It becomes much trickier when deciding how to dispose of the approximately 6 million cubic yards of sediment trapped behind.

Panelists noted these steps:

- Flushing the river's channel and cause flooding to the downstream communities of Casitas Springs and Live Oak
- Gray warned that any action must be considered carefully because of the potential impact on downstream property owners.

The three-hour discussion was called to share information on the dam's history and problems associated with it. Round-table members also identified issues that must be evaluated before any work could begin, such as commissioning engineering and environmental studies.

Panelists agreed that the dam should be removed because it has outlived its usefulness. Matilija Dam was built in 1948 to prevent floods and to store water for farmers and residents of the Ojai Valley.

Today it is nearly filled to the brim with mud and holds just 500 acre-feet of water.

"It can be stated categorically that it serves no flood-control purpose," said Art Coulter, director of the Public Works Agency. "We would like to see this (dismantling project) progress.

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