

## Tearing down Matilija Dam may be delayed by disagreement

By Zeke Barlow

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The sediment built up behind the obsolete Matilija Dam near Ojai is one reason people want to tear it down.

Agreeing what to do with that sediment, however, is proving to be the hardest part of the massive project to remove the dam. It's an issue some fear could kill the project.

"This project is hanging by a thread right now," said Jeff Pratt, Ventura County's public works director. If a consensus isn't reached, it could "die a de-facto death," he said.

About 2 million cubic yards of fine sediment are trapped behind the dam on the Ventura River. After officials in charge of the project last year said the two initial ideas for moving the sediment downstream were too costly or unpopular with landowners, they recently proposed a third option: trucking the sediment about 2 miles upstream of the dam.

It would be placed beside the river, mixed with concrete and covered with dirt. Ultimately, the mounds could stretch for 3,500 feet, rise 75 feet above the river and have vegetation on top.

Some environmental groups question the proposal, saying building a concrete structure in the flood plain contradicts the idea of tearing down a concrete dam to restore nature.

"The whole point was restoration of the river, which really requires that the natural processes are restored," said Paul Jenkin, chairman of the Matilija Coalition. "I don't think this plan is in keeping with that original plan. It is not clear to me what it is going to take to get the project back on track."

Nica Knite, a program manager with California Trout who has also expressed reservations about the proposal, could not be reached for comment.

A total of about 6 million cubic yards of rock, dirt, cobblestones, sand and fine sediment sit behind the dam. The original proposal to plow a channel through the backup and allow 4 million cubic yards of the larger pieces to eventually flow downstream to the sea still stands. But it's the fine sediment — called fines — that is the challenge. It can't just flow downstream because it could endanger the Casitas Municipal Water District's water supply.

"It is our Achilles heel," said Jim Hutchison, lead planner for the project with the U.S.

Army Corps of Engineers.

The new proposal would be subject to numerous regulatory reviews, and many question how the project will go forward if not everyone agrees.

Jenkin said years were spent on a feasibility plan agreed upon by the many divergent groups.

He said studying a new proposal to get rid of the fine sediment, which would change that agreement, could add years to the project.

One of the original proposals — moving the fines via a slurry pipeline to sites near Baldwin Road — is still feasible, he said. But last year, the Corps of Engineers said that proposal could cost as much as \$45 million and isn't economically viable. The new proposal could save about \$15 million, the agency said.

Jenkin argued that by delaying the project and doing new studies, the cost of the new upstream plan would be about the same as the pipeline proposal.

But proponents of the new plan, including county Supervisor Steve Bennett, who has been trying to drum up support for it, say it would cause the least environmental impact. Bennett said it would require less land and fewer resources and affect fewer landowners in the long run.

The total area affected by the new proposal would be 37 acres, vs. 71.5 acres for the Baldwin Road plan, which is near the Highway 150 bridge. Bennett said there would be less construction needed, and overall the new proposal is more eco-friendly.

"There is a compromise no matter where you put these fines, " he said. "This is very reasonable."

One reason the project got so much support and funding from Sacramento and Washington, D.C., involved the broad coalition of people behind it. Without funding and political support, the plan could lose its priority status to other projects and languish for years, Pratt said.

"We could have one of those projects that lingers," he said. "They can kill the project or slow it up to where it de-facto dies."

The Ojai Valley Land Conservancy and California Coastal Conservancy said they support the idea of upstream sediment storage, because it would have a smaller footprint than the downstream plans.

Jenkin wouldn't say if the issue could hold up his support for the project. "I'm not sure where we are going to go from here," he said.

*Editor's note Feb. 3: A previous version of this story misstated how the amount of sediment is measured. There are 6 million cubic yards of sediment behind the dam.*

