

Ventura River

THREAT: DAM

Summary

Matilija Dam not only stands in the way of the Ventura River's endangered southern steelhead; it also prevents much-needed sand and sediment from flowing downstream and replenishing popular southern California surfing beaches. While it is easy to find widespread support for removing the dam, it will be harder to find money to complete the task. Federal, state, and local authorities must agree that removing the dam is a top priority and must work together to find the necessary funds.

The River

The mainstem of the Ventura River flows approximately 16 miles from the confluence of Matilija Creek and North Fork Matilija Creek (located within the Los Padres National Forest) to the Pacific Ocean near the City of Ventura. The 228 square mile watershed encompasses both steep mountain and coastal plain ecosystems.

Approximately 5,000 adult steelhead once returned every year to the Ventura River watershed. These runs have now been reduced to less than 100. California's steelhead restoration plan indicates that historically the Ventura River probably had one of the largest runs of steelhead in southern California — and that restoring the Ventura runs will be critical for steelhead recovery in the region. Scientists consider the southern steelhead a genetically distinct fish species, the parent of all steelhead on the Pacific Coast.

The Ventura River at one time also replenished the beaches of Ventura County with its flow of sand and sediment. Each year, the river supplied over 250,000 cubic yards of sediment to the beaches, which are popular with surfers and vacationers.

The overall health of the Ventura River has been improving recently, thanks to restoration activities such as a \$27 million upgrade to a sewage treatment plant and several river and wetlands restoration projects. However, the Matilija Dam stands in the way of the river's ongoing recovery.

The Risk

The Matilija Dam is a 200-foot high concrete arched structure that is owned by the Ventura County Flood Control District. It was built in 1947 as part of the river's flood control system and to provide water for the Ojai Valley. The dam lacks fish passage, so southern steelhead are blocked from approximately 50 percent of their historical spawning and rearing habitat. The fish were listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1997.

Because a massive amount of silt has built up behind the structure, Matilija Dam no longer provides flood control benefits and provides only minimal water storage capacity. The reservoir, which originally held 7,000 acre-feet of water, now holds only 500 acre-feet — and the storage capacity continues to decrease. An estimated 5 million to 7 million cubic yards of sediment is backed up behind the dam — which is enough to cover 3,000 football fields with one foot of sand. The removal and disposal of the sediment is likely to be the greatest cost associated with removing the dam and restoring the river.

The sediment trapped behind the dam has resulted in major erosion problems for the beaches of Ventura. Sand and sediment no longer travel downstream to replenish the



MATILIJDA DAM (RIGHT) BLOCKS ENDANGERED STEELHEAD FROM IMPORTANT HABITAT. THE DAM ALSO PREVENTS SAND FROM FLOWING DOWNSTREAM TO REPLENISH POPULAR BEACHES. THIS IS CAUSING SHORELINE EROSION (NEXT PAGE).



coastal area. Not only does this affect the ecosystem, but it hurts tourism in Ventura — a county where an estimated \$50 million is spent on coastal tourism annually — and threatens the sport of surfing at these world-renowned beaches.

What Can Be Done

Removal of the dam, combined with installation of fish passage at the Robles Diversion Dam located downstream, would open approximately 30 miles of habitat to endangered steelhead. Dam removal would also reduce beach erosion problems and would open up public access to the Matilija Wilderness for outdoor education and recreation — providing much-needed access to open spaces in crowded southern California and generating green

tourism dollars for the area.

In June 1999, Ventura County officials agreed to support the removal of Matilija Dam subject to studies underway, as did other local, state, and federal public officials and agencies. In July 1999, the Bureau of Reclamation agreed to

study the cost and feasibility of removing the dam. This study, scheduled for completion in spring 2000, should provide a much more accurate cost for removing the structure. Past studies have put the removal cost anywhere from \$30 million to \$82 million.

The US Geological Survey also initiated studies to evaluate beach nourishment potential and impacts to sensitive species such as the southern steelhead and federally endangered tidewater goby. Congress has authorized the US Army Corps of Engineers to initiate studies in cooperation with the Bureau of Reclamation to facilitate the removal of Matilija Dam. A preliminary demonstration project by the County of Ventura to test removal techniques is scheduled for the fall of 2000.

Despite this forward movement in the effort to remove the Matilija Dam, a big obstacle still stands in the way — the money to complete the project. National, state, and local entities must continue to forge ahead with this task and restore these valuable resources not only for southern California, but



for the nation as well. The removal of Matilija Dam provides a unique opportunity to dismantle an ill-conceived project that no longer makes sense. Lack of money should not thwart the restoration of this national treasure.

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