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VENTURA COUNTY NEWS

## Task Force to Examine Dam Removal

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TIMES 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 \$82 million, the true cost is not known and would depend on the process chosen to bring the dam down, panel members said.

What seems sure at this point, said Supervisor John K. Flynn and other panel members, is that the dam will not be torn down unless Ventura County is able to

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## MATILIJA: Support for Dam Removal Is Growing

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tap heavily into state and federal dollars.

Even if money is found, it would take 10 to 15 years to conduct the required studies and to obtain the necessary permits before a single chunk of concrete is removed, panelists said.

"Removing a dam is at least as complicated and probably more expensive than building one," said Flynn, who organized the talk at the County Government Center in Ventura.

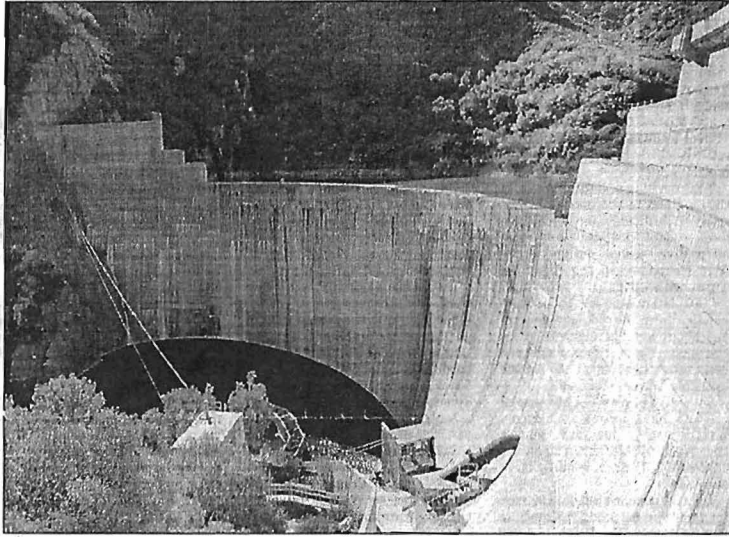
The three-hour discussion was called to share information on the dam's history and problems associated with it. Round-table members also identified issues that must be tackled before any work could begin, such as commissioning engineering and environmental studies.

Participants agreed that the dam should be retired because it has outlived its usefulness. Matilija Dam was built in 1948 to prevent floods and to store water for farmers and residents in 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 Goulet, director of the Public Works Agency. "We would like to see this [dismantling project] progress."

Environmentalists are concerned because the concrete wall acts as a 145-foot-tall barrier to endangered southern steelhead trout trying to reach 20 miles of prime spawning stream in Matilija Creek.



BRYAN CHAN / Los Angeles Times

Estimates for dismantling Matilija Dam, which many consider obsolete, have been as high as \$82 million.

The silvery ocellating trout 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 Sara Chubb, a U.S. Forest Services biologist.

If the dam were dismantled, the population probably would rebound to about 2,000 adult steelhead, Chubb told 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. Pre-flooding sediment would also eliminate erosion on the bike path at

Surfers Point in Ventura, a contentious issue 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.

Options include cutting a channel through the deposits and stabilizing the muck, allowing natural erosion to slowly wash the sediment downstream, or removing the sediment by dredging or trucking it away.

Gray warned that any action must be considered carefully because of the potential impact on downstream property owners. If sediment flows too heavily, it could

reshape the river's channel and cause flooding to the downstream communities of Castitas Springs and Live Oak Acres, Gray said.

Formation of the task force demonstrates growing support for the dam's removal. A majority of the Ventura County Board of Supervisors and the National Marine Fisheries Services already have expressed interest in the plan.

U.S. Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-Simi Valley) has asked federal engineers to begin a study on how to remove the dam. Brian Miller, Gallegly's chief of staff, said the \$100,000 study is awaiting funding approval by Congress.

Today, Supervisors Kathy Long and Susan Lacey are expected to ask their colleagues to appoint them to a board subcommittee that would monitor the dam removal project.

and environmental terms.

cost from \$75 million to \$150

complexity of the issues and the District.