

Lake Perris repairs part of state budget debate

Jim Miller, Riverside Press-Enterprise, 5-28-11

SACRAMENTO - A disagreement about who should pay to protect Lake Perris against earthquakes someday could mean an end to the boating, swimming and other water fun at the popular Riverside County lake.

Earlier this month, legislative budget subcommittees denied the Brown administration's request for parks bond money to help repair the lake's foundation and dam, a project that could cost more than \$300 million under one estimate.

Lawmakers and the Legislature's nonpartisan fiscal analyst raised concerns that the cash-strapped state risks committing itself to paying tens of millions of dollars to save the lake, which is also a state park.

Meanwhile, water contractors that normally would pay most of the project's cost have balked.

They could get by just fine without Lake Perris water, they say. They object to making their customers pay for a project that would largely benefit people who play at the lake, not drink from it.

How officials resolve the dispute could determine whether the lake continues to be the region's biggest recreation spot.

At some point, officials have said, the state either has to strengthen Lake Perris or empty it to protect thousands of homes in the path of floodwaters if the dam collapsed in an earthquake.

"We understand that Lake Perris has incredible value, both in terms of water resources but also as a recreational and economic resource in that region," said Assemblyman Richard Gordon, D-Redwood City, who leads the budget subcommittee that oversees the matter.

Gordon's budget panel this week approved funding for a study into how the state should deal with the issue. If included in the final budget, the report would be complete in December 2012.

"When money gets tight, people say, 'You can't take my parks money for that,' or 'You can't take my water money for something that's recreation'," he said. "We're going to try to resolve it and move it forward."

WATER PROJECT

Built in the early 1970s, Lake Perris is at the tail end of the State Water Project. The project, approved by voters in 1960, moves water from Northern California to parts of the San Francisco Bay Area, the Central Valley and heavily populated Southern California.

For years, Lake Perris was about 110 feet deep and held 42 billion gallons of water. In 2005, however, state engineers concluded that the lake's earthen dam could collapse during an earthquake in the magnitude-7.5 range.

In a worst-case scenario, a break would unleash 26 billion gallons of water across 30,000 acres of western Riverside County, from rural Lakeview to the Prado Dam near Corona.

Officials lowered the lake 25 feet as a temporary fix, reducing the lake's volume by about 40 percent. That has cut the number of boats allowed on the lake, from 450 to 250 at a time.

Under the Department of Water Resource's proposal, the Perris dam's foundation would be strengthened by a new berm. Workers also would build an emergency channel to divert flood waters.

Construction is scheduled to begin as early as July 2013, said David Samson of the Department of Water Resources.

RECREATION DISPUTE

But a disagreement over paying for the project seems far from being resolved.

In 1961, state lawmakers passed a law that requires officials to include recreation and fish-and-wildlife habitat at State Water Project facilities.

The law, known as the Davis-Dolwig Act, said taxpayers would pick up the share of the cost related to recreation and fish-and-wildlife habitat. Water contractors and their customers would cover the rest.

In the case of Lake Perris, the water resources department has estimated the recreational benefit to be 7 percent. The dam project had a 2008 cost estimate of \$360 million, meaning the piece for recreation -- and state taxpayers -- would be about \$25.2 million.

That is roughly \$41 for each of the 625,000 visits to Lake Perris State Recreation Area in 2008-09. It also is more than the \$22 million the state will save in 2011-12 by closing 70 parks announced this month, including the Salton Sea State Recreation Area in Riverside and Imperial counties.

"It's possible that the state down the line might end up on the hook for the entire cost," said Anton Favorini-Csorba, of the legislative analyst's office. "Do we want to potentially spend \$300 million to allow recreation at that site?"

Water contractors, however, object to their proposed share of the cost. They peg the lake's recreation benefit much higher.

A contractor-commissioned study put the project's recreational benefit -- and the state's share of the cost -- at 50 to 70 percent, much higher than the state's estimate.

An official with the Metropolitan Water District, Lake Perris' largest water contractor, said the district has cheaper alternatives to storing water at the lake.

"We're making it very clear that, in terms of water supplies, we don't see any benefit to us as water contractors to look at that facility beyond recreational purposes," said Debra Man, chief operating officer and assistant general manager for the Metropolitan Water District.

The district could stockpile water other places, she said, such as Diamond Valley Lake south of Hemet.

Samson, of the water department, said the department has "a little time until we get into a real pinch" on paying for the Lake Perris project.

"The issue with the Legislature not appropriating the recreation component is something that we will continue to pursue," Samson said. "We're staying the course."

Water contractors, meanwhile, may not be able to walk away so easily.

Gordon said the Legislature-ordered study would examine whether the laws covering the State Water Project obligate Metropolitan Water District and other agencies to pay for repairs at Lake Perris and elsewhere.

"I understand water users saying we don't need any of that water. And yet it was built as part of the State Water Project," Gordon said. "We need to get this debate over who pays for this finalized."