

California drought renews push for water storage projects

A long-standing proposal to enlarge Shasta Dam gets a boost from the Bureau of Reclamation

Paige Blankenbuehler, High Country News, 8-6-15

The drought that's been desiccating California for the past four years has added new urgency to a decades-old debate about the best way to secure reliable water supplies for a growing population: new dams or efficiency measures.

While the debate about how to better manage water continues, the drought is triggering more political momentum for several water storage projects in California's agriculture-rich Central Valley. An enlargement of Shasta Dam, 10 miles from the town of Redding, has been discussed for over three decades, and it passed a major hurdle last week when the Bureau of Reclamation released its final feasibility study.

The agency says that the most practical option would increase the dam's height by 18.5 feet, adding capacity to store 634,000 more acre-feet of water for agricultural, municipal and industrial use. It would also increase the survival of struggling salmon populations in the upper Sacramento River by releasing more cold water stored behind the dam to improve temperatures in the Sacramento River during exceptionally critical years. Since 1980, the Shasta project has been stuck in a sort of feasibility-study-feedback loop, ebbing and flowing with shifting politics and environmental changes, but the new report declared the project both technologically and economically feasible.

"People want to see action, not studies," says Leigh McDaniel, who grows wine grapes, almonds, alfalfa, wheat and barley in the northern Central Valley. "Now that the drought has persisted as long as it has, the people of California want to see construction of these projects." Last year, the state's voters passed Proposition 1, a bond that set aside \$2.7 billion for water storage projects, amid opposition from environmentalists.

The Bureau of Reclamation's Shasta report gave no indication of where the funding for the \$1.2 billion project would come from — only that the federal government would not foot the bill. The project isn't eligible for Prop 1 dollars because the higher reservoir levels would flood upper stretches of the McCloud River, which is protected under the state's Scenic River Protection Act.

But the California Emergency Drought Relief Act, introduced last week by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., emerged as a possible answer to the funding problem. The law would provide funding for various drought responses across the state, including for new water storage.

Proponents of the Shasta project include farmers in the region who say they haven't been able to get their full appropriation of water for years. Nadine Bailey, head of the Central Valley based Family Water Alliance, which represents landowners and rural communities, says that raising Shasta Dam would give the Bureau of Reclamation more flexibility for water-release decisions. "We live in a feast or famine region," she says. "The state's water system just needs more storage so we can capture rainwater in those heavy periods."

McDaniel, who depends on Shasta water diversions for his 1,900-acre ranch, is on the board of a similar water storage project in Northern California that would divert storm runoff to the Sites Reservoir, and says California can't afford to delay such projects. The Sites Reservoir and Shasta are both part of the CALFED

Bay-Delta Program, an ambitious state, federally and locally funded effort that promised to ensure reliable water supplies for 23 million Californians and farms, passed in 2000.

“In my perfect mad scientist world, I would like to see all of these storage projects and enlargements go through,” he says. “There’s no way to go forward without addressing the problem, and you can’t address it unless there is more storage.”

Opponents to the Shasta project say that raising the dam doesn’t get at the heart of the drought problem: water scarcity. For the past 15 years, the reservoir’s average level for this time of year has been 2.8 million acre-feet, a far cry from the 4.5 million acre-feet capacity. On Wednesday the reservoir level was 1.9 million acre-feet, according to the California Data Exchange Center of the Department of Water Resources – about two-thirds percent of the normal level for this time of year.

The Shasta project experienced a major setback last November when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released a draft report in coordination with the Bureau of Reclamation that found the project would not, in fact, significantly improve water temperatures enough to benefit salmon. The service has since backpedaled on that statement and says it’s still in the “drafting phases” of the final environmental impact report.

If Feinstein’s bill is approved and the Shasta project secures federal funding, the enlargement would be up for approval by the Secretary of the Interior. Congress could authorize the project for construction this year or next.