

San Clemente Dam to come down

Cal Am revives \$84 million project to demolish structure

Daniel Lopez, Monterey County Herald, 11-14-09

California American Water says it will try to tear down San Clemente Dam on the Carmel River after all.

Plans to demolish the aging 106-foot-tall dam came to a halt in February because of a disagreement over project liability and a freeze in state funding.

But Cal Am, which owns the dam, announced Friday that with the help of the California Coastal Conservancy and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, plans to remove the dam are back on.

"The project will resolve earthquake and flood safety issues associated with the dam while benefiting the wildlife that depend on the river," Cal Am President Robert MacLean said in a news release.

San Clemente Dam was built in 1921 to hold 2,000 acre-feet of water. The reservoir has filled with about 2.5million cubic yards of sediment over the years and now holds only about 125 acre-feet of water.

In the early 1990s, the state's Department of Water Resources Division of Dam Safety declared the structure unsafe. Officials say the dam could collapse in the event of a magnitude-5.5 earthquake on the Tularcitos Fault, which the dam straddles, or in a magnitude-7 or greater earthquake on the San Andreas Fault.

An environmental impact report issued in 2007 by the Department of Water Resources and the Army Corps of Engineers evaluated five options to bring the dam into compliance with current standards.

The options included reinforcing the dam by buttressing it with added concrete or removing it, with the Carmel River being rerouted through San Clemente Creek to bypass the accumulated sediment.

Environmental groups have favored demolishing the dam because that would provide the greatest benefit to wildlife and the river ecosystem.

Cal Am and the Coastal Conservancy were working together to demolish the dam until negotiations dissolved earlier this year because no one wanted to assume liability for problems that could arise as a result of the project. Matters were further complicated by the state's budget crisis. Cal Am said it would buttress the dam instead.

Demolishing the dam would cost about \$84million and the Coastal Conservancy would contribute \$34million, but its money was tied up by the state.

Cal Am's announcement of the revived plans came late Friday, and officials at the Coastal Conservancy could not be reached for comment.

Catherine Bowie, spokeswoman for the water company, said its project partner plans to apply for state and federal grants and to seek other funding sources to pay for the demolition.

Cal Am would pay \$50million of the total cost and deed 928 acres around the dam as parkland. Bowie said they

are trying to identify an agency that would be willing to assume responsibility for that land.

Project liability remains an issue, "but with the help of environmental groups and elected representatives on the local, state and national level, whose support for the removal project is nearly unanimous, we are hopeful the liability issues can be resolved," MacLean said.

Bowie said Cal Am will try to recover its share of the project cost from ratepayers. The company's share is based on what it would cost to reinforce the dam.

Jonas Minton, water policy adviser for the Planning and Conservation League, said the joint effort of Cal Am and the Coastal Conservancy to remove the dam is a cost-effective solution.

"This will minimize rate impact to the water users and lead to the restoration of an incredible ecosystem in the heart of the Monterey region," he said.

Bowie said initial construction for dam removal could begin in September 2013, with the project completed by January 2016.

Demolition will require approval of the Public Utilities Commission.