
Lake Mendocino dam project questioned

GLENDA ANDERSON

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After almost nine years and expenditures of more than \$1.2 million, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is threatening to shelve a study about increasing the height of the dam at Lake Mendocino.

Corps officials said they can't continue without additional funding and proof that the dam would be cost effective.

A preliminary cost benefit analysis states: "There is a very low likelihood that further study would find the dam raise project to be in the federal interest." Federal interest is not met if costs outweigh value, the analysis states.

Local water officials disagree with the cost-benefit analysis and are scrambling to convince the Corps to continue the study.

"In a year where it couldn't be more plain that it needs to happen, they're walking away," said Sean White, manager of the Russian River Flood Control and Water Conservation Improvement District. The district manages the Ukiah Valley's right to 8,000 acre feet of water in Lake Mendocino.

Persistent drought conditions have reduced lake levels to historic winter lows, and there's no significant rainfall in sight. Farmers along the Russian River, which is fed by Lake Mendocino water releases, are in danger of having insufficient water to irrigate their crops or protect them from frost.

The problem would not be as dire if Coyote Dam -#8212; which created Lake Mendocino -#8212; was raised by 36 feet, as planned since it was constructed in the late 1950s.

The additional water from raising the 160-foot tall earthen dam would increase the lake's storage capacity from about 122,400 acre feet to 199,000 acre feet, according to the Army Corps. An acre-foot of water is about 325,851 gallons.

A series of studies on completing the project have been underway for more than a decade. They've proved to be time consuming and expensive.

The Inland Water and Power Commission, the multi-agency organization responsible for funding the local share of the study's price tag, already has paid \$617,000 toward the costs of the feasibility study. The Commission's members include the Russian River district, the county of Mendocino, City of Ukiah and the Potter Valley Irrigation District. Redwood Valley's water district is a member but has not contributed financially to the effort.

Army Corps officials say insufficient funding is the primary reason for shelving the study. The Corps has been short of funds for several years and has been unable to make a contribution during that time, said Karen Rippey, the Corps' project manager for the study.

The Inland Water and Power Commission has not made a contribution during that time either, largely because its contribution, per a 2005 agreement, is half of the study's costs, officials said.

Under Corps rules, studies become inactive after three years without funding, officials said.

Rippey said completing the study could cost \$4 million or more.

As little as \$10,000 could keep the study active, said Army Corps spokesman John Hardesty. But another \$500,000 likely would be needed to continue meaningful development of the project.

An influx of funding also would reactivate the study should it be shelved, Hardesty said.

But money isn't the only, or primary, factor under consideration, according to White and Janet Pauli, chairwoman of the Inland Water and Power Commission.

They said Corps officials have made it clear that proceeding with the dam study may be a waste of resources because the preliminary cost analysis indicates the costs of raising the dam -#8212; an estimated \$300 million -#8212; outweigh the benefits.

The Commission disagrees with the analysis, which states that the value of the water is only \$77 million over the life of the project.

The analysis was "rigged" to fail, White said. The only benefit the Corps considered was the price for which the additional water could be sold.

Local officials say the Corps needs to consider other values, such the multi-million dollar agricultural crops fed by Lake Mendocino water releases into the Russian River.

Corps officials said they will consider information submitted by the local agencies.

The Inland Water and Power Commission this week sent a letter to the Army Corps seeking additional information about its cost analysis and asking for more time to respond to the possible inactivation.

The Commission also plans to seek assistance from Congress.

(You can reach Staff Writer Glenda Anderson at 462-6473 or glenda.anderson@pressdemocrat.com.)