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Ventura River is one of worst

by Lenny Roberts

The Ventura River ranks third among the nation's most environmentally degraded rivers and its survival depends on the removal of Matilija Dam, according to a just-released report.

The report was generated by American Rivers, a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to protecting and restoring America's rivers and states that the 53-year-old Matilija Dam has outlived its usefulness. The report described the dam as an impassable roadblock for native Southern California steelhead runs, while contributing to the erosion of popular surfing beaches nearby. As part of a series of nationwide press conferences, members of California Trout, Supervisor Kathy Long's office, the Surfrider Foundation, the Environmental Defense Center and the Ventura Visitor and Convention Bureau addressed the media near the dam site Monday morning. Also attending the press



Y. Armando Nieto



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conference were heads of local environmental groups, invited guests, elected officials and others concerned with the removal of the dam, and each preached the same basic message: The dam must go. Jim Edmondson, conservation director for California Trout, served as master of ceremonies. Edmondson said, "I am honored to have been asked to lead this press conference on behalf of American Rivers and the sweeping alliance of government agencies, non-profit organizations and individual citizens vitally concerned about the ecological and economic health of Ventura County."

Edmondson described the dam as nothing more than a retaining wall, holding enough sediment to add 30 feet to each beach in Ventura County. At its deepest point, a mile-long stretch of sediment has been measured at 70 feet.

"Prior to the construction of Matilija Dam, 5,000 magnificent adult steelhead annually returned to the Ventura River. Today, we count them in dozens," Edmondson cautioned.

"Removing Matilija Dam and installing a fish passage a few miles downstream at the Robles Diversion Dam, which I would like to say is under way, will open up approximately 30 miles of premier habitat for this beleaguered fish. Restoring just 20 percent of the historic steelhead population to this river will provide in excess of \$25 million to the local economy.

"As you have heard today,

Matilija Dam is a silt tub. But what distinguishes this press conference from the other nine announcements going on across this country is that everyone here agrees that Matilija Dam must be removed.

"Governor Davis and President Clinton: Tear down this dam - tear down this public nuisance." To accelerate the demise of the dam, the Southern California Steelhead Recovery Coalition, chaired by Edmondson, announced that a letter will be sent to the State Senate Environmental Water Quality Commission requesting a budget augmentation of up to \$45 million to help pay for the dam's removal, which has unofficially been projected to cost between \$20 million and \$135 million. Also, a formal request is being drafted to Mary Nichols, secretary of resources, to launch a Department of Fish and Game federal steelhead recovery program, whereby 24 specialists would be hired to prevent the extinction of the southern steelhead.

In June 1999, Ventura County officials agreed to support the removal of Matilija Dam, which is owned by the county's Flood Control District. A month later, the Bureau of Reclamation agreed to study the cost and feasibility of removing the dam. The study is scheduled to be released next month.

Groups such as the Friends of the Ventura River, founded by Mark Capelli, recognized the potential for endangerment years ago, but only when the southern steelhead

was added to the endangered species list in 1997 did an acceleration to remove the dam begin.

Russ Baggerly, chairman of the Ojai Valley Sanitary District and member of the Environmental Coalition of Ventura County, described Capelli as the "mover and shaker" of the dam removal effort who has worked for the betterment of the river for three decades.

"The river is really worth saving because of what Friends of the Ventura River have done and the co-relationship with the other environmental groups in Ventura County," Baggerly said.

"The obstacle is always money. When the fish got listed (as an endangered species), the critical habitat that rests behind the dam made it clearly evident to everyone that the dam has to come down if the fish is to survive, and people want that fish to survive."

Baggerly targeted all the governmental agencies that, for decades, were not willing to spend money on the inevitable removal project.

"When the fish got listed, you had a dramatic reason for the dam to come down," he said.

"Steelhead are a very hearty fish that have survived for millennia, and what we have to do now as stewards of the river is to ensure that (extinction) doesn't happen.

"There are a number of public agencies that are currently in the process of developing habitat conservation plans so they get permitted to do the work they need to do in the river and

tributaries in a manner that will not harm the fish."

Capelli said there is a demonstration evaluation planned for the fall when heavy equipment will remove the top 5 feet of the dam's spillway. The plan is to learn more about the techniques that will be required to cut, lift and remove the 8-foot-thick, 5,000-pound concrete blocks that comprise the dam. The evaluation is estimated to cost \$300,000.

"We have \$200,000 from the California Coastal Conservancy already; the county has chipped in about \$35,000 in engineering services and is applying for a \$100,000 grant from the Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and then we're going to ask three coastal cities to chip in about \$30,000 each," Capelli explained.

Ojai Mayor Suza Francina said the city needs to determine how it can best cooperate with all the agencies that will be involved in the removal project.

"Whenever I see a project like this, I wish we could get working on it sooner rather than later," Francina said. "Thinking of what's at stake, I wish it were tomorrow."

Y. Armando Nieto is the executive director of the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center.

"We need to look at the restoration of the Ventura River as an opportunity for the communities that were once linked by the river. It's just over 20 miles from the Matilija Wilderness Area in the Los Padres National Forest above this

dam to the mouth of the Ventura River near Surfer's Point on the city of Ventura's beach front," Nieto said.

"Matilija Dam is the most visible barrier between the beach and wilderness. There are other barriers that have to be addressed, but today's national recognition of the threat posed by Matilija Dam is a giant step toward reuniting a fragmented river."

The 198-foot dam was built in 1947 to provide flood control and fresh water for the Ojai Valley. Because of massive amounts of sand and silt that have accumulated behind the dam, it now provides minimal water storage benefits, decreasing from 7,000 acre feet during the facility's prime to about 500 acre feet currently.

Furthermore, the estimated 5 million to 7 million cubic yards of sediment backed up in the reservoir prevents the sand from flowing downstream to replenish the coastal ecosystem, and prevents the endangered steelhead trout from reaching 50 percent of their historical spawning and rearing habitat. Engineers estimate that the accumulated sand, if stacked one foot high, would cover 3,000 football fields.

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