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## Matilija Dam Removal Project Backed Up

Although demolition of the structure is years away, public officials say they are seeing progress.

By LYNNE BARNES  
Times Staff Writer

Amid much fanfare, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt climbed behind the controls of a construction crane in 2000 and personally removed a 16,000-pound chunk of concrete from the face of Matilija Dam. It was the symbolic first step in razing the dam that has been blamed for the decline of the endangered southern steelhead trout and the depletion of sand at Ventura County beaches.

Babbitt vowed to make the dam's removal a top priority. "I'm absolutely confident that in a number of years I'll be back here as former secretary and a private citizen to celebrate this dam being gone," he said at a news conference attended by numerous dignitaries at the time.

Four years later, Babbitt is no longer secretary and the 20-story-tall dam still stands in the Ventura County backcountry, filled nearly to the top with mud and silt — with no clear date set for its removal.

But officials said they were making progress.

After reviewing various methods, state and local officials recently agreed on a plan to dismantle the dam. And a spokesman for Sen. Barbara

Boxer, long a proponent of the demolition project, said this week that she planned to seek funding for it in next year's federal budget.

If approved, the federal government would pick up 65% of the cost, with local and state governments responsible for the remainder.

Though money is tight, "there are still certain projects that are worthy of this kind of funding," said Boxer spokesman David Sandretti. "We're talking about [wildlife] habitat and flood-control issues, which is a public-safety concern. For that and many other reasons, this is an important project."

If all goes well, officials agree that work could begin by 2006. [See Dam, Page B10]



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**STILL THERE:** The Matilija Dam is blamed for the decline of the steelhead trout and the depletion of Ventura County beaches.