

SPENCER WEINER *Los Angeles Times*

GOING, GOING GONE? *Matilija Dam — its reservoir clogged with silt — is to be torn down, but the project awaits authorization and an interagency dispute has delayed initial work.*

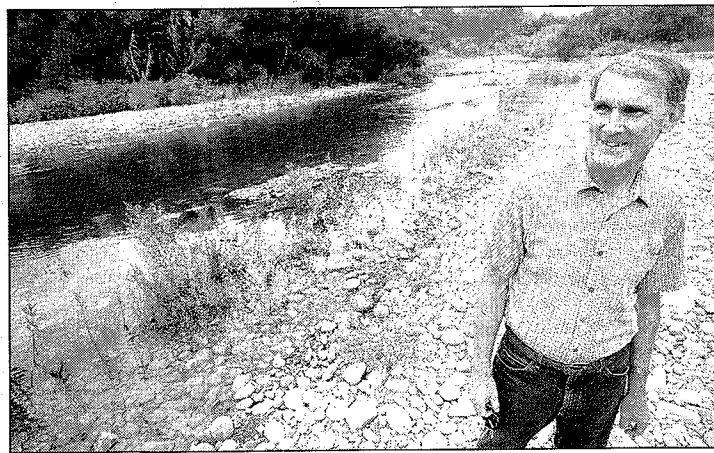
Removal of Dam Still Needs OK

[*Dam, from Page B1*] Grant money will also be used to remove the voracious *Arundo* canes, said Jeff Pratt, director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection Agency.

Arundo replicates through tough, fibrous rhizomes deep in the soil, so workers will begin removing it high above the dam to prevent its spread during floods, Pratt said. *Arundo* removal is an important step in restoring natural vegetation to the river, he said.

The project has, until recently, enjoyed remarkable support from a long list of government agencies and environmental groups involved in the demolition.

After much debate, the agencies agreed in 2004 to remove 2 million cubic yards of silt through a slurry pipe, reinforce or build new levees to handle increased water flows downstream, and then remove the



BRYAN CHAN *Los Angeles Times*

WAITING: *County Supervisor Steve Bennett, walking alongside the Ventura River, says the benefits will be worth the time spent.*

Marine Fisheries Service, he said.

In the spring, the Fisheries Service said it needed more information before issuing its biologic analysis of the project, Pratt said. The Corps of Engineers contends it has provided more than enough information, he said.

Meanwhile, work cannot get started until the disagreement is resolved.

"It can slow it down," Bennett said. If the Fisheries Service "doesn't give the biologic opin-

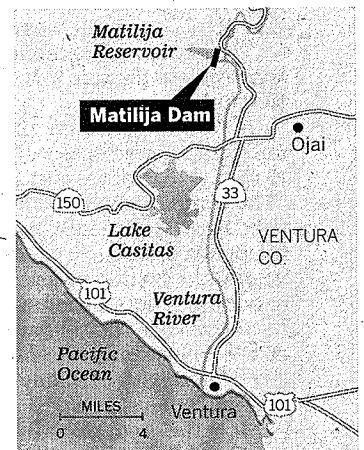
at least four months to complete, he said.

"That takes us to January, and as of yet, they still have not notified us that it has started," he said.

National Marine Fisheries' officials could not be reached for comment.

The project also is awaiting formal authorization by Congress and President Bush.

It is contained in a federal water bill that has been held up for several years, said Sue Hughes, a Ventura County legislative ana-



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A conference committee is working on a final version of the Water Resources Development Act, and it's expected to go to the president this year, Hughes said.

After the project is authorized, local officials and the involved agencies will have to lobby the federal government each year for appropriations. Because of the enormous costs, the project cannot be completed without a two-thirds share coming from federal sources, Bennett said.

"It's going to be very much dependent on getting help from Congress," he said.

Dammed If They Don't Get OK

Efforts to remove
Matilija Dam in Ventura
County still await
congressional approval.
And it's still not out of
the weeds, so to speak.

By CATHERINE SAILLANT
Times Staff Writer

Two foes stand in the way of restoring the Ventura River to a free-flowing state: bureaucratic infighting over removal of the upstream Matilija Dam and the ever-hardy *Arundo* weed.

Six years after a Clinton administration official removed a ceremonial chunk of the 198-foot-high dam north of Ojai, Congress has yet to authorize efforts to take down the obsolete structure.

A fragile agreement between government agencies and environmentalists about how best to remove it is beginning to fray.

And then there's that *Arundo*.

The invasive cane grows 20 feet tall, hogs water and chokes out native plant life along the Ventura River, officials say. Every bit of it has to go before the dam can be dismantled.

Supporters of removing the dam say the marathon patience needed to see the project through will pay off.

"It might be 15 years before you finish the whole project," said Ventura County Supervisor Steve Bennett, whose district includes the dam. "But in the end, it will benefit a lot of people."

Bruce Babbitt, who was then Interior secretary, made much the same point when he removed an 8-ton piece of the dam with a crane in October 2000. He promised that the federal government would do its part to make the \$130-million project happen.

Across the U.S., dams that no longer serve a useful purpose are being removed to restore rivers and reestablish ecosystems. At 198 feet tall and 600 feet wide, Matilija is one of the largest slated for removal.

The silt-clogged structure no longer serves a useful purpose, federal studies found. Its removal would restore the steel-head fishery to the Ventura River and replenish sand at Ventura's beaches.

A little-known benefit, according to Bennett, is the likelihood that upgrades to water pumps and wells that are part of the project will save Ventura and Ojai ratepayers the future cost of paying for them.

This week, for instance, the state gave Ventura County \$5 million to relocate two water wells used by the city of Ventura.

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