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BRACE FOR
MATTHEW'S
IMPACT**

USA Today, 4A



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DAM CLEARS A HURDLE



Tearing down long-defunct Matilija won't be easy or quick, officials say

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Plans to tear down the long-defunct Matilija Dam jumped a hurdle earlier this year.

But officials said Thursday that bringing down the close to 200-foot concrete dam won't be easy or quick.

"It's like running a hurdle. You just have to keep jumping over these obstacles that keep presenting themselves," said Sam Schuchat, executive officer of the California Coastal Conservancy.

"I think we'll get there in the end. The question is how long it's going to take."

Local, state and federal officials toured the dam Thursday as Peter Sheydayi, interim director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, talked about recent steps forward and the work that still needs to happen.

For years, there has been widespread support to tear down the dam above Ojai. The problem is what to do with the about 8 million cubic yards of sediment that has built up behind it over the past six or so decades.

When the dam goes away, fine sediment could cause problems for those downstream, including the Casitas Municipal Water District.

See DAM, Page 2A



PHOTOS BY ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR
Top: Representatives of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District lead a tour of Matilija Dam near Ojai on Thursday. Above: Peter Sheydayi, interim director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, speaks during a tour.

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SAM SCHUCHAT
EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF THE CALIFORNIA COASTAL CONSERVANCY

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Dam

Continued from Page 1A

The project to tear down the dam started in 1999, Sheydayi told the small crowd that included John Laird, secretary of the California Natural Resources Agency, county Supervisor Steve Bennett, U.S. Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Westlake Village, and Assemblyman Das Williams, D-Carpinteria.

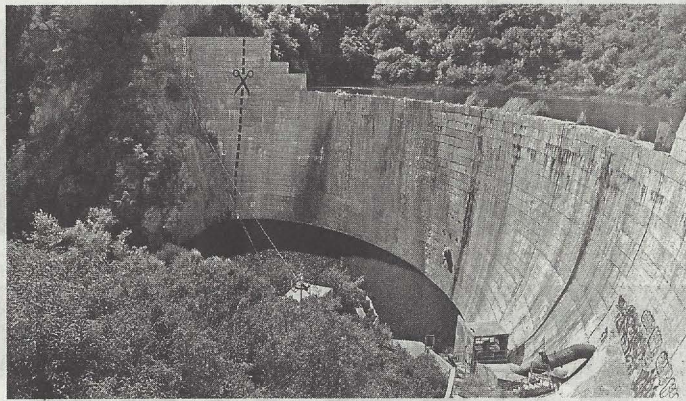
A project OK'd by Congress in 2007 stalled a few years ago after costs climbed too high. But representatives from government agencies, non-profit groups, property owners and others kept meeting to find a way to move forward.

In March, the group agreed on a new plan.

But it comes with a bit of a wrinkle. It's different from the one Congress signed off on, and that means starting from scratch in a lot of ways.

The plan calls for boring two tunnels at the base of the dam and blasting open those holes during a big storm, allowing a lot of the fine sediment to wash through.

Once that happens — and if enough sediment washes away — the dam could be removed the next year.



ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR

Groups have been supporting the removal of the 198-foot-tall Matilija Dam for years.

As officials looked out at the dam, a giant pair of scissors and a dotted line still clearly showed on its face. Someone painted it there back in 2011, with the line running from the top of the dam down to the waterline.

When Schuchat first got involved about 15 years ago, those seeking the dam's removal were still trying to get a project approved by the Army Corps of Engineers, he said.

In theory, they could do try to do it again. But going through the process likely would take up to 10 years of study with no guarantee that Congress would authorize the work in the end.

Then they would still need to get funding.

"From 2007 until very recently, we were still trying to get Congress to fund this project. We just sort of met with obstacle after obstacle," Schuchat said.

The Coastal Conservancy has funded much of the state's share up to now in the process.

Instead, local officials want to look at whether they could fund the project without the Corps of Engineers. For now, that's just something to explore.

The project likely will cost \$60 to \$80 million, but that's only an estimate.

Along with getting the

funding, officials will need to do some environmental review and get various regulatory agencies to sign off on the plan.

"The fact that we have to raise all the money, do most of the work, and then wait, is going to make this tricky," Schuchat said. "It's hard to — once you raised public money — to hold on to it over an undetermined period of time."

And, of course, the weather is unpredictable.

To make it work, Lake Casitas needs to be 80 percent full, and "then we need a really big storm to hit upstream of the dam so we get a nice big flow," he said.