

Matilija Dam demolition plan awarded \$175,000

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Organizers behind an effort to dismantle Matilija Dam receive a \$175,000 grant from a new fund that aims to remove aging dams throughout the West



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the 198-foot-high Matilija Dam, constructed in 1947, holds an estimated eight million cubic yards of sediment in Matilija Creek near Ojai. (Photo: ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR)Buy Photo

A nearly two-decade effort to dismantle the aging Matilija Dam near Ojai received a boost Tuesday when a national philanthropic group announced it will give \$175,000 to project organizers.

The award from the [Hewlett Foundation's](#) newly created Open Rivers Fund to the Matilija Coalition will be used to write grant proposals to help pay for the project; to hammer out final

details on the overall design concept; and to conduct community outreach, said Paul Jenkin, Ventura campaign coordinator for the Surfrider Foundation and founder of the [Matilija Coalition](#), a group working to restore the Ventura River.

“This is really big for us because it provides the resources for us to play a meaningful role in the project,” Jenkin said. “I’ve been involved with this for 20 years now, and it’s really encouraging to see this level of support from private funders like this.”

Completed in 1948 on Matilija Creek, a tributary of the Ventura River, the dam was originally intended to create a reservoir. But the pool eventually filled with sediment and has been out of use for decades, creating an obstruction to endangered steelhead trout and robbing the river and coastline of soil and sand replenishment.

The proposed demolition of Matilija Dam, 16 miles upstream from the Pacific Ocean, is part of a movement across the western U.S. to remove obsolete dams that are a danger to humans and an environmental threat to wildlife.

“We looked at whether there was infrastructure, community engagement and social, economic and environmental impacts, and Matilija rose to the top,” said Michael Mantell, president of [Resources Legacy Fund](#), which oversees Open Rivers for the Hewlett Foundation.

“There’s a diverse community that uses those beaches,” he continued. “It’s pretty amazing, the benefits that will come with the restoration of the Ventura River.”

The other projects to receive inaugural grants from the \$50 million Open Rivers endowment are the Rogue River Basin in Oregon and the Nelson Dam and Yakima River Watershed in Washington state.

At 168 feet, Matilija would be one of the largest dam removal projects in California. Originally 200 feet, it was lowered by 30 feet in 1965 because of structural concerns. The Klamath River project spans two states, California and Oregon, with four dams identified for removal, including the 173-foot high Iron Gate Dam in California.

Jenkin said the estimated cost of taking down Matilija Dam is about \$80 million, but firm numbers won’t be available until the final design concept is complete. He said the goal is to have a permitted project and final design in hand by 2019.

He said there is a pending grant application with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife for more than \$3 million in Proposition 1 funding — money allocated for water supply infrastructure projects, including watershed protection — to complete the final engineering and design.

The Matilija Coalition, an organization that includes California Trout, Surfrider Foundation and Patagonia, has been working with state and federal agencies for nearly 20 years to develop a strategy to remove the dam and restore the river.

An earlier version of the demolition project was approved by Congress in 2007, but it stalled a few years ago after costs climbed too high. Organizers continued to meet to find a way to move forward.

They agreed on a new plan in March that calls for boring two tunnels at the base of the dam and blasting them open during a large storm, allowing much of the fine sediment to wash through. If enough sediment washed away, the dam could be removed the next year.

As organizers continue to work on the plan, including defining recreational opportunities along the Ventura River Parkway, the recognition by Open Rivers will help convince government agencies and donors that the Matilija Dam demolition project is viable and important to the community, said Peter Sheydayi, interim director of the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, which owns the dam.

“They (Open Rivers Fund) bring a lot of credibility to our efforts,” he said Monday. “There’s a general feeling of momentum moving now that we haven’t seen before.”

Star staff writer Cheri Carlson contributed to this report.