

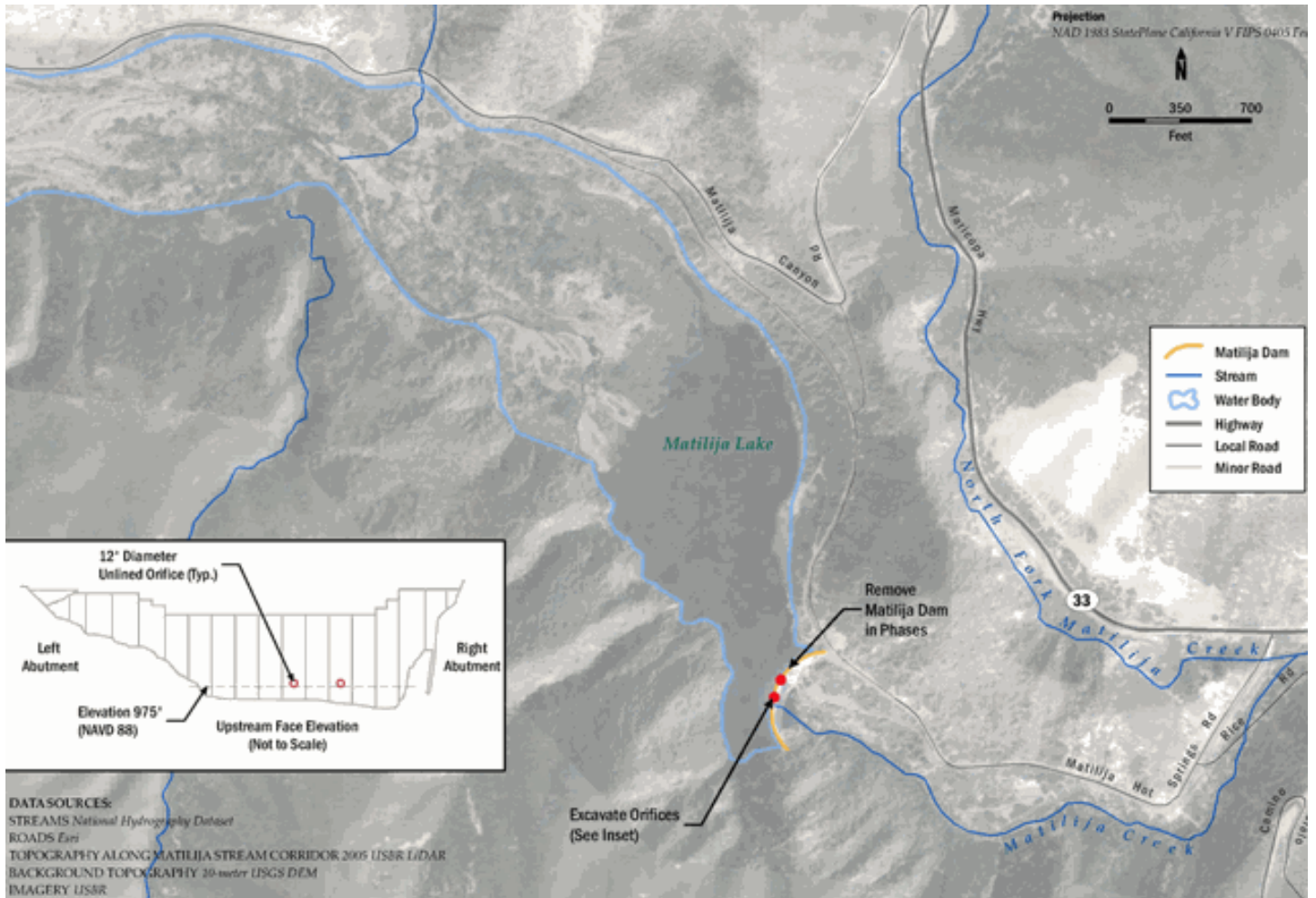
https://www.ojaivalleynews.com/news/new-bridge-is-one-more-step-toward-goal-of-dam-removal/article_ce492b58-4b7a-11ed-ba56-3383a4c35cf0.html

FEATURED

New bridge is one more step toward goal of dam removal

Perry Van Houten

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A ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monday, Oct. 17, at 10 a.m. will mark a major milestone in efforts to remove the obsolete Matilija Dam.

The new \$13.4 million Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge in Oak View — the first of several infrastructure projects downstream of the dam that must be finished before the 75-year-old structure can be taken down — is close to completion.

On Oct. 6, agencies and stakeholders in the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project provided an update on technical and environmental issues, and funding and outreach for the project begun more than 20 years ago.

“We’re making progress and we’re building momentum,” said Glenn Shephard, director of Watershed Protection with the Ventura County Public Works Agency, during the public, online meeting hosted by the Ventura River Watershed Council.

A hallmark grant of \$3.3 million from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife in 2017 for the design of the project provided the initial energy behind the momentum. “It’s been five years since then and we continue to move along in the right direction,” said Shephard, adding there’s been much activity on the project since the last update in April.

David Yardas, a consultant to the Resources Legacy Fund focusing on the MDERP, provided a funding update on the project that includes new bridges and new or improved levees. He said the project is nearing the \$30 million mark since the CDFW grant.

Nearly \$2 million in design funding for the replacement of the Camino Cielo Bridge is coming from two grants — a \$1.3 million grant approved in August by the Wildlife Conservation Board, and an earlier grant from the State Coastal Conservancy.

The bridge, “a modest span-type structure that will allow much higher flows to pass, along with substantial sediment flows,” will also provide improved fish passage and should be shovel-ready in two to three years, Yardas said, calling the new bridge “a multi-benefit project that is probably next up for implementation.”

On Oct. 11, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors approved the Camino Cielo grant and another grant award for \$1.56 million from CDFW for improvements at the Robles Diversion Facility.

Engineers are considering several alternatives for improvements aimed at increasing sediment transport, improving water supply and enhancing fish passage.

Yardas said design of the Robles project is expected to get underway early next year with completion by 2030. MDERP continues to pursue federal funding, including a potential grant for more than \$50 million for the implementation of watershed protection and flood-control improvements, said Yardas.

The current price tag for the total dam removal project now stands at \$190 million, according to Yardas, who said roughly \$26 million to \$27 million has been raised to date.

The estimated cost of just taking down the dam has increased from \$30 million to \$40 million, due to inflation, said Yardas. Still, he's hopeful it can be done within the next several years. "With luck and commitment we will have a shot at having the initial sediment release by the end of the decade," he said.

Technical updates on MDERP were provided by VCPWA's Kirk Norman and Christopher Solis, who said the current plan for removal of the dam is boring two 12-foot-diameter tunnels into, but not all the way through, the base of the dam.

A few days before a major storm event, demolition crews will blow the orifices open and high water flow will carry much of the sediment trapped behind the dam downstream. Preparation for the flushing event is expected to take one season, with dam removal taking one season, according to VCPWA.

Of the three levee projects, design work on an improved levee in Live Oak Acres is expected to be complete in 2024. A design contract for an improved levee in Casitas Springs will go up for bids in December or January.

Pam Lindsey, environmental program manager for Watershed Protection, provided environmental updates at the meeting and said that much environmental processing needs to be done over the next several years.

Documents under the California Environmental Quality Act for the removal of the dam and the natural sediment transport are in process now, said Lindsey, who hopes to start the subsequent CEQA document for the Camino Cielo Bridge project early next year, and for the Live Oak Acres and Casitas Springs levees about a year from now.

CEQA documents for Robles and a new levee in Meiners Oaks will follow a couple of years later, Lindsey said.

Documents under the National Environmental Policy Act are still several years away, she added.

In terms of public outreach on MDERP, there are two concurrent components in place: gathering community input on the project as it stands, and future visioning for what occurs upstream, which will be handled in partnership with Ojai Valley Land Conservancy.

In closing the meeting, Shephard said political engagement and energy for the project has been renewed, including engagement by Supervisor Matt LaVere's office. "Back to the moniker of making progress and building momentum," he said.

For more information on MDERP, visit <https://matilijadam.org>.

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