

## Efforts to remove Matilija Dam get \$4.3 million to clear one hurdle, more ahead



Groups have been supporting the removal of the 198-foot-tall Matilija Dam for years. ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR



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A nearly 25-year effort to tear down the long-defunct Matilija Dam near Ojai got a \$4.3 million boost this month.

The state's Wildlife Conservation Board agreed to provide the funds to the Ventura County Public Works Agency - Watershed Protection District to help finish design plans and an environmental review.

For years, there has been widespread support to remove the dam. Completed in 1948, the dam was originally intended to create a reservoir. But the pool filled with sediment and has been out of use for decades. Of the original 7,000 acre feet of capacity, around 100 acre feet is left.

The structure creates a barrier for endangered steelhead trout and robs the river and coastline of soil and sand replenishment. But 8 million cubic yards of sediment is stuck behind the massive concrete wall and has complicated efforts to demolish it.

When the dam goes away, fine sediment could cause problems for those downstream.

The recently approved funding would help pay for designs and environmental reviews for dam removal and three downstream projects in the communities of Casitas Springs, Live Oak Acres and Meiners Oaks.



Matilija Dam as seen from a Ventura County Sheriff's helicopter Wednesday morning, Jan. 4, 2023. Two copters from the air unit flew over local watersheds to scout potential issues in advance of an incoming rainstorm. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/VENTURA COUNTY AIR UNIT

## State funds shortfall

The same board gave the county a \$5 million grant in 2020 to help pay for similar work. But costs have increased.

Previously, the plan called for designing several downstream projects at the same time. Officials also thought a single environmental report would be enough, said Kirk Norman, the watershed agency's project manager and an engineer.

As initial plans were developed, officials determined the downstream projects would need to be done separately, increasing the design costs, Norman said. Each of those projects also will now require a separate environmental review.

The county asked the Wildlife Conservation Board to fund the shortfall, and at a meeting earlier this month, the board agreed.

Norman called the grant "a big help," saying the money allows the agency to move forward with designs for all three downstream projects.

## Finish line years away

Several hurdles still exist for the decades-long project.

Once planned and reviewed, downstream projects need to be completed. Then, plans call for boring two tunnels at the base of the 168-foot-high dam and flushing sediment out of those holes during large storms.

That's still years off. The county's "optimistic schedule" calls for getting the tunnels in place by 2030. Once enough sediment is washed away, the dam could come down.

Officials estimate around \$230 million will be needed to demolish the dam, finish downstream projects and restore the area.

In the meantime, the county expects to release a draft Environmental Impact Report on the dam's removal this fall.

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