

# Ojai Valley News

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## Should Matilija Dam be removed?

by Bonnie MacNeill

While not an active party in the removal of Matilija Dam, Casitas Municipal Water District (CMWD) is keeping a close eye on county, state and federal officials who are working toward its removal. CMWD General Manager John Johnson has been involved in ongoing discussions and meetings with the county about the dam's removal and said last week that if federal officials receive funding for the removal of Matilija Dam, it would be the largest dam to be removed anywhere in the country. However, Johnson told the CMWD Board at its planning session Saturday that he has his doubts that much will occur beyond discussion and good intentions. Although Matilija Dam has been rented to CMWD until 2009 by Ventura County, along with a pipeline serving 122 customers with Casitas water, CMWD has no financial obligation for the dam's removal.

The pipeline is expected to remain



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with CMWD after the county reclaims Matilija Dam, although the district has a policy that it will only absorb water lines that meet CMWD's criteria at the time of the transfer.

CMWD officials have indicated they do not care whether the dam is removed or not, as long as the removal does not negatively impact its system.

"We just want to see that it's taken down in a reasonable fashion," said Director Jim Coultas, adding that former CMWD Director Mike Frees was opposed to its removal because of the negative impact removal of the dam would have on downstream habitat and CMWD's operation of Robles Diversion.

Frees was concerned that the removal would produce extra sediment flowing into Robles Diversion and the potential for additional expense should CMWD construct a fish ladder at the diversion during the next fiscal year.

"This clearly has some effect on what we do," said Johnson. "It is clear from comments that they are aware of what sediment might do at Robles. Whether they act on that or not, who knows?"

"Notching the dam (the most recent idea under consideration by those wanting to remove the dam) and putting sediment down the river would not be good for the steelhead," said Coultas. One option would be to truck the material from the dam through Ojai Valley to the beach.

If there is a fish ladder at Robles Diversion, and Matilija Dam is removed, it is hoped that

steelhead trout, long suspected of using the Ventura River and its tributaries to reach the upper canyon streams to spawn, would return.

A study conducted prior to steelhead being listed as an endangered species indicated the fish had used these streams as spawning grounds. Rainbow trout, trapped and living in the upper canyon streams, are believed to be the remnants of stranded steelhead populations.

"The reality is - and I've talked to the feds - they want to get the salmon upstream and get the soil to the beach. There may be another way to do it without removing the dam," said director Chuck Bennett.

Directors agreed that the main goals in eliminating the dam are allowing the steelhead to resume migrating upstream and removing an estimated four to 10 million cubic yards of silt and sand trapped behind Matilija Dam. One alternative plan to removing the dam would involve trucking the material to Ventura beaches where recent erosion has taken its toll on the shoreline.

Because CMWD is under the watchful eye of CalTrout, a statewide trout conservation organization which has threatened to sue if a fish ladder is not constructed at Robles Diversion, that project has been scheduled. CMWD is also an active participant in creating a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the entire Ventura River watershed, another plus in CMWD's favor because studies done in preparation for the HCP could be used in getting permits

for projects such as the dam removal.

Johnson said CMWD should move fast to get its various projects under way so officials making decisions about removing Matilija Dam will take the CMWD diversion and HCP into consideration when planning the removal process. Johnson estimated both projects will be completed prior to any funding being obtained for the removal of Matilija Dam, if fund ever is appropriated.

"The folks in office now are interested in removing the dam. They probably don't have enough time remaining in their terms to actually tear it down," said Johnson.

And if it is removed, and at "... some point in time they come looking for local participation from us, maybe the money we will have already spent on the HCP will cover it," Coultas added.

Johnson said county officials will also see a benefit in the permitting process if the HCP is completed before any removal project is under taken because different permitting rules would be in effect.

The removal project, he added, would still require an environmental impact study, a fact that could hold up removing the dam for several years.

"To the feds, this would be a coup. This is the biggest dam they've talked about removing," said Johnson.

Understanding the impacts the Matilija Dam project would have on CMWD, should it occur, is necessary for the district's long-range planning, Johnson said, and

suggested CMWD directors should begin looking at the issues they will face in 2009, when the rental period for Matilija Dam ends, whether the dam is removed or not.

In the short-term, 2000 may see some departmental reorganization and more water sports at the Blue Heron Water Playground. Directors will tour the Fresno Water Park later this year with an eye to creating some type of get-wet attraction for older children and adults.

It was also suggested that mone be set aside each year with which to acquire books, tapes and videos for the new Marion Walker Library at CMWD offices.

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## ***Remembering When ...***

### Water has always been the center of life in Ojai and surrounding areas

by David Mason

*"In 1825, the San Buenaventura Mission owned 37,000 head of cattle, 600 head of horses, 200 yoke of working oxen, 500 mules, 30,000 sheep, 200 goats, \$25,000 in silver and gold coin and no hogs." - The Ojai, Aug. 15, 1894*

Since the earliest settlement of Ventura County, water has been an important part of the county's development. Water from the Ojai Valley would even play a major role in the life and times of the San Buenaventura Mission. The mission was first built in the 1700s, but was destroyed when a sudden rise in the Ventura River flooded the area. A second mission was erected on an elevation that was securely above any such danger.



MISSION AQUEDUCT AFTER A CUT was made through it to allow automobile access to the Cañada Larga - 1934.



LAKE MATILIJA was popular with fishermen and boaters during the 1950s.

The clear, healthy and abundant water flowing to the ocean from the Ojai Valley was very much needed at the mission, not only for drinking, but also for irrigation, so the early settlers could plant crops and trees.

Many attempts had been made to divert the water to the mission site, but they were all unsuccessful. It was a very grave problem for the padres.

A solution was finally decided upon - an aqueduct running from the Ojai Valley might, indeed, do the trick, but how was this incredible task to become a reality?

The valley Indians, Chumash as we know them, had enjoyed the occasional visit from the Spanish during Father Serra's time. The Spaniards had recognized the Chumash's talent for and their strength and agility. The answer was to train these industrious people in the techniques necessary to build the much-needed aqueduct.

Stonecutters and stonemasons were imported by the Spanish government in 1770 to serve as laborers and instructors to the Indians. The elaborate seven-mile aqueduct was then constructed by the Indians with the new skills that they had learned from the Spanish artisans.

When it was finished, the aqueduct channeled water from the San Antonio Creek, near the Arnaz adobe (now just below Oak View) and wound along the Ventura Avenue area, finally ending at the mission. The wonderful supply of water was instrumental in making San Buenaventura a viable community.



LAKE CASITAS, when full, became one of the most beautiful spots in California, according to sportscasters reporting on the 1984 Olympic events held there.



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The aqueduct served the mission and surrounding area for about 80 years. It withstood the 1857 earthquake that destroyed the mission's roof and walls, but the precious water that it had so successfully brought to the mission would become its downfall when, in 1852, a major flood brought an end to this great waterway.

The aqueduct represented an impressive technical accomplishment and occupied an important position in the complex early California water system. The water coming out of the Ojai Valley had been clear and at a cool temperature. It flowed off the Topa Topa mountains, down through Senior Canyon and across the valley floor. The Senior Canyon had been named for the early pioneer Edwin Senior, who was born in Huddersfield, Yorkshire, England, in 1847. He came from a very proper and highly respected family, his father being an old-fashioned Yorkshire schoolmaster. By the age of 14, Senior was working as an apprentice in a wholesale Italian warehouse. A few years later, he went into the dry goods business for himself. Business had been good to Senior, but in 1883, when his health was beginning to fail, his doctor advised a change of climate; he decided to come to California. Upon his arrival in this state, he first settled in Santa Paula, where he bought a 10-acre ranch. He only stayed there for one year and sold out. He used the money from the sale of his ranch to buy cattle and immediately went into the stock-raising business, having as many as 70 or 80 head of stock,



which he herded in the Sespe. While cattle ranching, he built a small log cabin for him and his only companion, his dog. After a few years, loneliness took over and Senior left the Sespe and settled on 160 acres in what is today Senior Canyon.

In writing about water in the Ojai Valley, Patricia Fry, in her book "The Ojai Valley, An Illustrated History," said, "Early Ojai settlers were pleased to discover artesian wells abundant here. These naturally flowing wells served households, stock and crops sufficiently at first. Some landowners utilized water directly from the creeks."

Many of the early ranchers drilled wells for their water. Gridley, while drilling for water, actually struck gold. Before the word could spread through the Ojai Valley, Gridley filed a claim with the county on his gold strike, but he never mined for the gold. He was much more interested in finding water than the precious metal.

In 1912, Edward D. Libbey, the cut glass manufacturer from Ohio and Ojai benefactor, was instrumental in forming a group of prominent men to secure the Gridley water rights.

According to Fry, "Water was a highly valued element. It was a farmer's livelihood and a family's lifeblood. History teaches us that where something is in demand, but in short supply, greed abounds - and so it was in Nordhoff (now Ojai)."

In 1944, the Ventura County Flood Control District recommended a \$3 million bond issue to construct a dam in the Matilija Canyon, just

above the Matilija Hot Springs Resort.

Fry wrote that, "The Matilija Dam project met with major problems. Unexpected delays, rising costs and heavy criticism plagued the job. Clay began oozing from under the dam foundation and the carpenters walked out. The dam was eventually deemed unsafe and a lawsuit against the engineering firm ensued."

The dam was finally finished in 1948, after it was proved to be safe. But as though to add insult to injury, the magnificent lake that the dam would have formed, stood empty. The Ojai Valley had been in a three-year drought. Fry wrote that, "During the winter of 1951, a storm produced enough rain to fill the reservoir to capacity and the first spill occurred the following January."

Fry also added, "By March 1952, 44,960 acre-feet of water had been lost over the Matilija Dam spillway to the ocean. It was evident that a larger facility was necessary, especially when considering the long-range water picture. In the meantime, geologists tested a dam site at Coyote Creek. A possible fault caused the project to be canceled, but after further investigation, this decision was reversed. Consultants for the Flood Control District recommended a 90,000 acre-foot reservoir on Coyote Creek to stop the Matilija overflow, and the project was approved. The Federal Bureau of Reclamation completed Casitas Dam in 1959.

Today, the Casitas Dam is going through a reconstruction process, using modern technologies to

provide for more earthquake safety.

The Matilija Dam is being studied for possible removal for environmental reasons. If it is removed, it would be the largest dam to have ever been removed in this country.

As for the mission aqueduct, a small portion remains today and is clearly a significant structure in the county and in Western American history.

There is little doubt that these remnants constitute one of the oldest man-made structures in the state. Time and the elements have destroyed much of the remaining sections of the structure, and almost total destruction has been accomplished by man's development of the area during the past 60 years.

This local landmark is a heritage of the cultures that built the great state of California. It is a registered national, state and county landmark. The longevity of the Cañada Larga section, and the fact that it represents a tremendous engineering feat in its time and place, establishes its historic value to California mission life.

The remaining part of the aqueduct is a few feet from the Ojai Freeway, and any additional traffic and ground work in the area adjacent to this national treasure must be kept at a minimum if this important part of Ventura County's history is to remain for the next generation.

This article is written in loving memory of my friend Carla Bard, who was a longtime

environmentalist and a former member of the California Water Conservation Commission.

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The 53-year-old dam is on Matilija Creek, part of the Ventura River system, and is about 16 miles upstream from where the river empties into the ocean. Environmentalists, politicians and other backers say removing it will help replenish sand on beaches down the coast, allow endangered steelhead trout to migrate upstream to closed-off, ancient spawning grounds, and open up recreation opportunities.

Two stumbling blocks are money and the immense nature of the project. A Coastal Conservancy staff report, which recommends approval of the funding, notes that there is "little or no experience in the United States in removing a dam this large."

"This would be one of the major undertakings in terms of dam removal in this country," Barajas concurred.

A portion of the dam's east flank would be removed under the pilot project. County Supervisor John Flynn, one of the removal backers, said the top five feet of the dam in a 160-foot span could be lopped off. Overall, Matilija Dam is 198 feet tall and spans more than 600 feet. The part to come down is above the water line, and thus no sediment would flow downstream, Barajas said.

The pilot project likely would occur in October. Other funding would come from federal agencies involved — the Bureau of Reclamation, the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Service — the county and possibly local coastal cities.

Overall project options include tearing the dam down in phases to prevent large and potentially dangerous sediment flows downstream, moving the sediment either up or downstream, or piping the sediment downstream, Barajas said.

The Coastal Conservancy is a state agency that works to preserve and protect coastal areas, wetlands, other wildlife areas, parks and farmland.

Dams

# Agency to aid Matilija Dam removal study with \$200,000

**DEMOLITION:** Funds to help conservancy determine the best way to bring down ineffective structure.

By Brett Johnson  
Staff writer

A state agency is poised to give \$200,000 next week to a demonstration project that will remove a portion of Matilija Dam this fall.

The Coastal Conservancy, meeting Wednesday in Oakland, will consider the ante toward a \$615,000 pilot project that will look at how heavy equipment can get into the remote area and test ways to remove the dam's concrete blocks. Explosives, as well as a saw that penetrates the concrete and lifts it out, are possible removal techniques, said Federico Barajas, project manager for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The pilot project is an outgrowth of ongoing federal and state studies on whether it's feasible to remove the entire dam, which is virtually filled with sediment and has lost up to 90 percent of its water-storage capacity. An appraisal of the overall dam removal is due this spring, Barajas said.

U.C. Stan