

End is near for Matilija Dam

Project to aid Ventura River steelhead runs

ASSOCIATED PRESS

OJAI — Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt stepped into a crane Thursday and tore off part of a dam that has blocked a major tributary to the Ventura River for more than half a century. His demolition work was the latest move in a nationwide campaign to breach old dams.

Conservationists said removing the Matilija Dam along Matilija Creek will help restore steelhead runs and return mountain sediment to eroding Ventura County beaches.

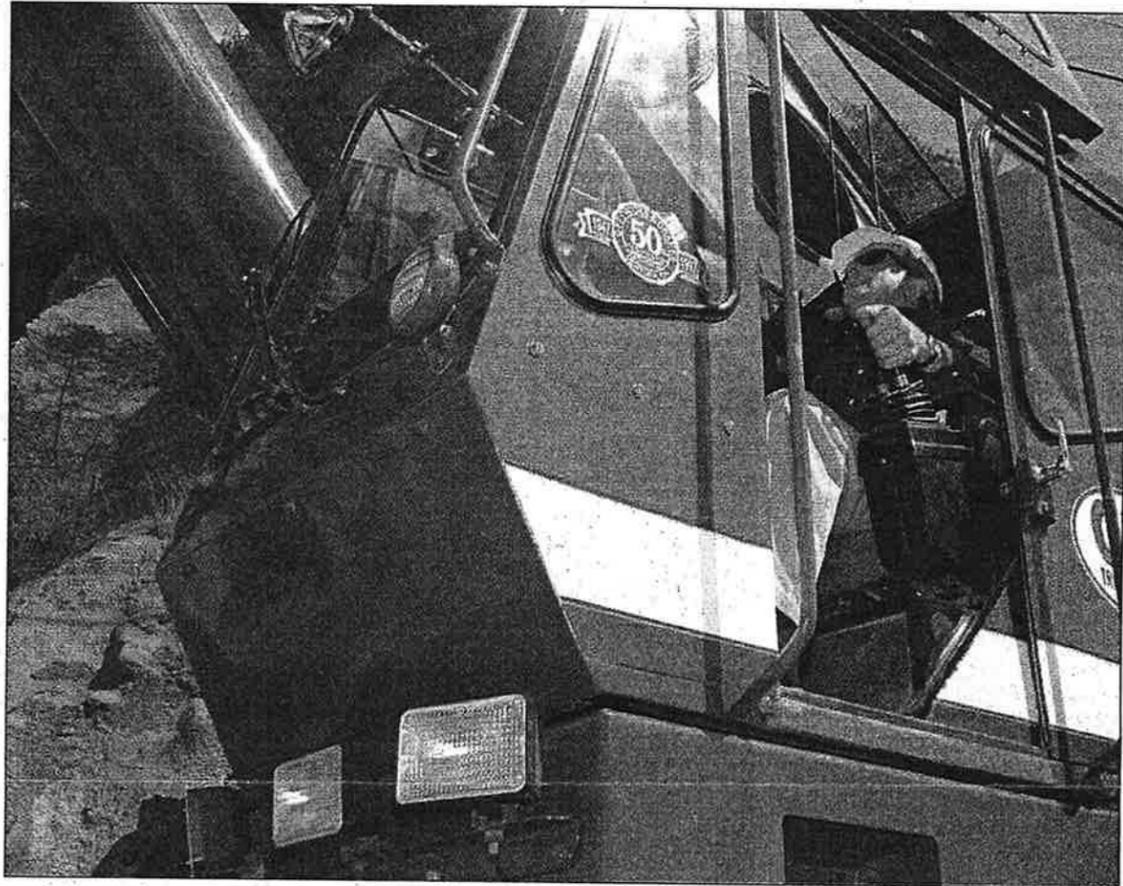
"It was a little hard to believe," Mark Capelli, a member of Friends of the Ventura River, said after Babbitt removed a 16,000-pound concrete slab from the dam's face. "It's been sitting up there for over a half a century, and I don't think there are too many people who thought it would be lifted off, at least in our lifetime. It was an historic moment."

The 200-foot-tall dam, about 20 miles north of Ventura, was built in 1948 to control floods and store water. Since then, it has blocked an estimated 5 million to 7 million cubic yards of sediment, enough to extend all Ventura County beaches by 30 feet. The layer of sand and gravel behind the dam is estimated at 140 feet deep.

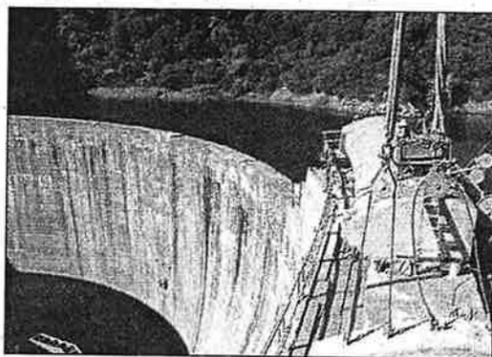
Its concrete face also prevents steelhead from returning upriver to spawning beds. The number of steelhead swimming up the Ventura River dropped from about 2,000 a year before the dam was built to about 100 today.

Thursday's event was the first step in a demonstration project to determine whether the dam can be removed in layers. The sediment backed up behind it presents the most difficult challenge to breaching the dam.

The project could cost as much as \$180 million for a relatively quick removal process that would involve hauling sediment to Ventura County beaches, according to a U.S.



MICHELLE SHAPIRO / NEWS-PRESS



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

Above, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt uses a crane to remove a slab of concrete from the Matilija Dam. The 200-foot-tall dam was built in 1948 to control floods and store water.

Bureau of Reclamation study. It could cost as little as \$20 million if officials choose to let nature move the sediment downstream by gradually removing the dam over about 20 years.

After determining how best to breach the dam, federal, state and Ventura County agencies will seek funding. Babbitt said the cooperative effort, which brought about 200

people to the dam site Thursday, should serve as a model for the rest of California and the nation.

The Interior Department has been examining the nation's 75,000 dams to determine which have environmental costs that outweigh their usefulness. Dams are a barricade for native fish species and collect tons of silt.

Babbitt has drawn attention to the

issue by presiding over several "dam-bustings," including the dismantling of Sault Ste. Marie Dam last week in Northern California.

None of those projects, however, compares with the work required to take down the Matilija.

The Sault Ste. Marie Dam is about 20 feet high, and the tallest of the dams removed in the last two decades was about 40 feet.

METRO NEWS

Babbitt Begins Demolition of Silt-Choked Matilija Dam

■ **Environment:** Experts will now study ways to tear down the 1948 structure, which is clogged with 6 million cubic yards of dirt.

By JENIFER RAGLAND
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

OJAI—Using the pedals and levers of a towering blue crane, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt pulled a 16,000-pound chunk from the mammoth face of Matilija Dam on Thursday morning, the first symbolic step in the demolition of the aging structure.

"Now that was real power," Babbitt said with a grin as he greeted an applauding crowd of politicians, environmentalists and community leaders who gathered for the start of a project that will test methods for tearing down the 20-story-tall dam north of Ojai.

Matilija Dam, built in 1948 to provide drinking water to the Ojai Valley and reduce flood hazards on the Ventura River, is choked with 6 million cubic yards of sand and dirt and is cracking with age.

Environmentalists and political leaders argue that the dam blocks the endangered steelhead trout from prime spawning grounds upstream in Matilija Creek and robs Ventura County's beaches of sand.

Babbitt agreed, and promised that he will, for at least the 120 days that he remains in office, help see the project through. Officials have estimated the cost of removing the dam and the silt behind it at \$22 million to \$170 million.

"We will produce the resources that will bring your plans to reality," Babbitt said. "The benefits, in the long run, will far outweigh the costs."

Thursday's ceremony kicked off



CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times

Reservoir behind Matilija Dam, which was built to control flooding and provide drinking water for Ojai.

a \$426,000 county project to determine the best way to dismantle the dam. Three cutting techniques will be tested.

For the last three years, Babbitt has led a nationwide tour to knock down about a dozen obsolete dams, usually carrying a symbolic sledgehammer with him. Matilija, which is 198 feet tall and spans 600 feet, is the largest of the targeted dams.

The nonprofit group California Trout has pushed for the dam's removal so the county's once-plentiful population of steelhead trout can be restored.

"My fantasy is to see abundant schools of steelhead swimming up the Ventura River, past the former Matilija Dam and up into the reaches of the river where they will spawn and continue their life cycle," said Nick DiCroce, a member of the group. He hoped the dam would be gone within five years, about the same amount of time it took to build it in the 1940s. Officials previously have estimated the time frame for demolition at 10 to 40 years.

Babbitt said he came to Ventura County to make it happen sooner.

"I'm absolutely confident that in a number of years, I'll be back here

as former secretary and a private citizen to celebrate this dam being gone," Babbitt said.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which Babbitt oversees, is working with other state and federal agencies on the project's feasibility study, which could take another two years to complete.

The colossal amount of sediment stacked behind the dam poses a more perplexing problem than the concrete structure, officials said. Possibilities for removing the silt range from building a large conveyor belt that would move ma-

terial onto the beach for sand replenishment to progressively sawing off chunks of the dam and letting nature take its course.

The dam's demolition was first proposed by Ed Henke in his 1998 position paper, "A Case for the Removal of Matilija Dam."

Henke, who grew up in Ventura County and now lives in Ashland, Ore., said he left the ceremony feeling overwhelmed.

"We're finding our place in this great big ecosystem," Henke said. "We have to show the whole world we can do this."

SERVING

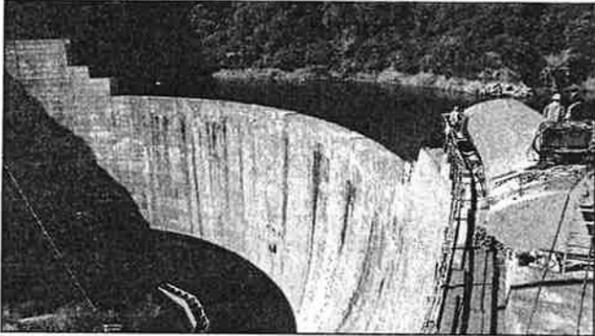
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Daily News

dailynews.com

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2000

Doing fish a FINE FAVOR



Workers start dismantling Matilija Dam to aid area's endangered steelhead trout

By Amy Raisin
Staff Writer

OJAI — Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt manned a crane Thursday as he helped remove an 8-ton concrete slab from the lip of Matilija Dam, part of a multi-agency effort to dismantle the structure and restore the habitat of the endangered steelhead trout.

The removal of a five-foot-high slab was a demonstration project intended to test whether the planned method of dam removal will work. Conservationists want to remove the dam along Matilija Creek, saying it will help restore steelhead runs and return mountain sediment to eroding Ventura County beaches.

"We find that as we restore the waters, the waters restore our communities," Babbitt said. "The fish — once these waters come down — they're back the next year as if by some primal memory."

Indigenous to the state, southern steelhead trout spend most of their lives in the ocean but spawn in fresh water. Experts say the 200-foot-high dam has severely inhibited their reproductive habits.

Built in 1947 to provide a water supply and reduce flooding along the Ventura River, the dam no longer serves those purposes and

over the decades has collected millions of cubic yards of sediment.

Depending on how the dam is dismantled, the work could take two to 25 years and cost \$21.6 million to \$179.4 million, according to the Bureau of Reclamation.

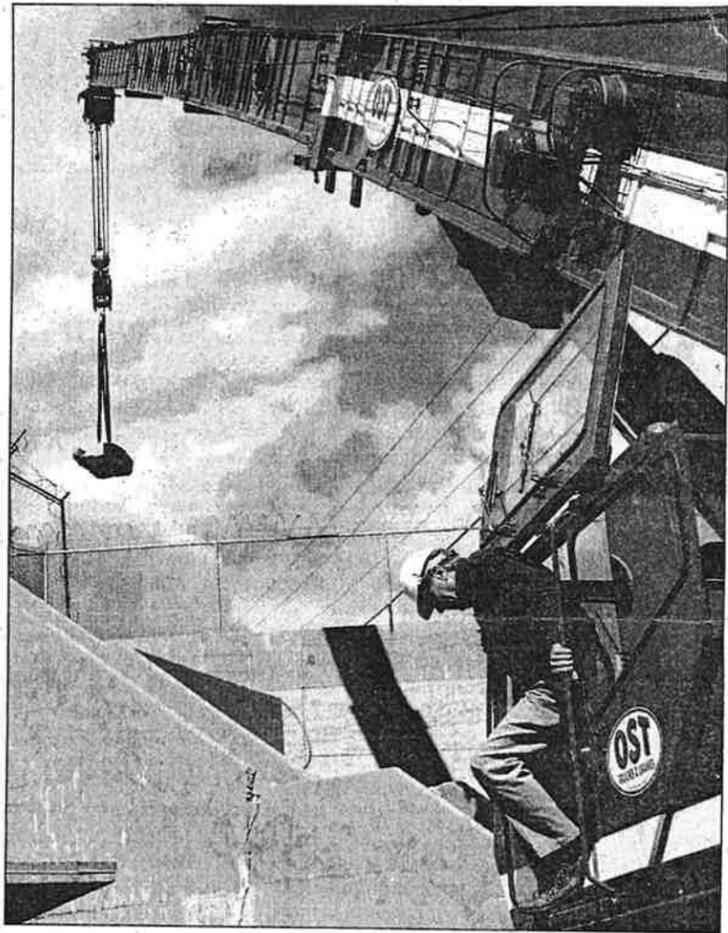
The cheapest method entails removing the dam in stages, letting the sediment move with the natural creek flow. The most expensive method would require a slurry pipeline to transport the fine-grain material.

County Supervisor Kathy Long and representatives of the state Department of Fish and Game joined Babbitt in praising the joint effort of agencies like the Bureau of Reclamation, the Ventura County Flood Control District and the U.S. Forest Service.

Some Ojai residents came out to watch the demonstration project on what had served as their childhood backdrop.

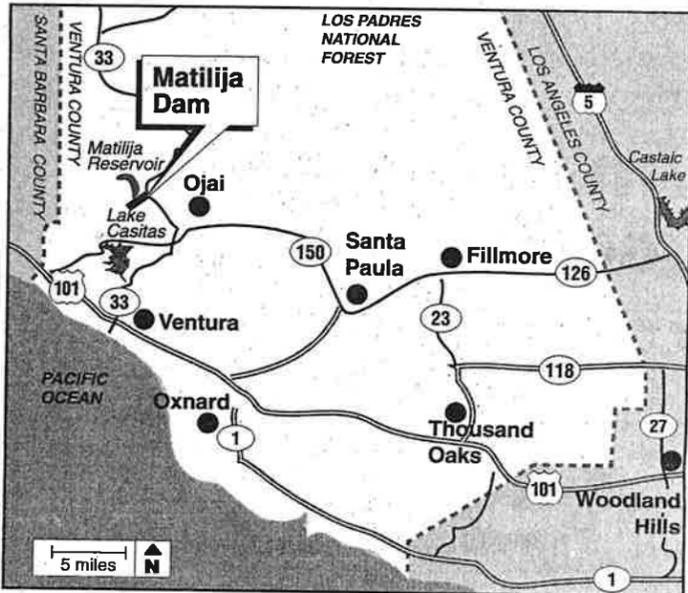
"We used to go down the spillings and swim and fish," said Martin Chapman, 35, a lifelong Ojai resident. "But we won't miss it too terribly. It would have been much better growing up without the dam."

"Seeing pictures of what it was like before, there was so much beauty. Not a bunch of concrete."



Michael Owen Baker/Staff Photographer

Top left, government officials want the Matilija Dam above Ojai removed to bring back endangered steelhead trout. Above, U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt climbs from the crane Thursday after lifting off the dam section suspended in the background.





Photos by CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times

The first chunk to be removed from the dam, a 16,000-pound concrete slab, dangles from a crane operated by Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt.

DAM: Babbitt Kicks Off Demolition

Continued from B1

said. "It's a step that shows we have the momentum to take that dam down."

Matilija Dam, built in 1948 to provide drinking water to the Ojai Valley and reduce flood hazards on the Ventura River, is now choked with 6 million cubic yards of sand and dirt and is cracking with age.

Environmentalists and political leaders argue that the massive structure blocks the endangered steelhead trout from prime spawning grounds upstream in Matilija Creek and robs Ventura County's beaches of sand.

Babbitt agreed, and promised that in his last 120 days in office the federal government will do its part to see the project through. Officials have estimated it could cost from \$22 million to \$170 million to remove the dam and the silt behind it, depending on the method used.

"We will produce the resources that will bring your plans to reality," Babbitt said. "The benefits, in the long run, will far outweigh the costs."

Thursday's ceremonial tear-down kicked off a \$426,000 county demonstration project, approved by supervisors in August, which aims to determine the best method to remove the dam's concrete face. Three cutting techniques will be tested.

Ron Coons, Ventura County di-



Babbitt promised federal resources for the demolition. "The benefits, in the long run, will far outweigh the costs," he said.

rector of public works, said crews began preparing for Babbitt's visit about three weeks ago, but the real work began Thursday and will continue for about a month.

For the past three years, Babbitt has led a nationwide tour to knock down about a dozen obsolete dams, usually carrying a symbolic sledgehammer with him. Matilija, which is 198 feet tall and 600 feet wide, is the largest dam in the country to be targeted for removal.

"When I saw a picture of this thing I knew it was time to bring in the heavy equipment," he quipped, pointing to the massive dam that, along with the mountains of Los Padres National Forest, served as a backdrop for the ceremony. "With Matilija, we're entering the next chapter of dam removal."

And it's an important chapter for the future of Ventura County, said Nick DiCroce of California Trout. The nonprofit group has pushed for the dam's removal so the county's once-plentiful population of steelhead trout can be restored.



The reservoir behind Matilija Dam is clogged with dirt and sand.

"My fantasy is to see abundant schools of steelhead swimming up the Ventura River, past the former Matilija Dam and up into the reaches of the river where they will spawn and continue their life cycle," DiCroce said. He challenged the crowd to remove the dam within five years—about the same amount of time it took to build it in the 1940s. Officials previously estimated the task would take 10 to 40 years.

That is precisely why Babbitt said he made the trek to Ventura County this week, reaffirming his commitment to making it happen sooner.

"I'm absolutely confident that in a number of years I'll be back here as former secretary and a private citizen to celebrate this dam being gone," Babbitt said.

The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, an agency that Babbitt oversees, is working with other state and federal agencies on the project's feasibility study, which could take an-

other two years to complete.

The colossal amount of sediment stacked behind the dam poses a more perplexing problem than the concrete structure itself, officials said. Possibilities for removing the silt range from building a large conveyor belt that would move material from the dam to the beach for sand replenishment to progressively sawing off chunks of the dam and letting nature take its course.

But while there may be no consensus on the best way to remove the dam, most everyone has agreed it should come down since it was first proposed by environmentalist Ed Henke in his 1998 position paper, "A Case for the Removal of Matilija Dam."

Henke, who grew up in Ventura County but now lives in Ashland, Ore., attended Thursday's ceremony and left feeling "overwhelmed."

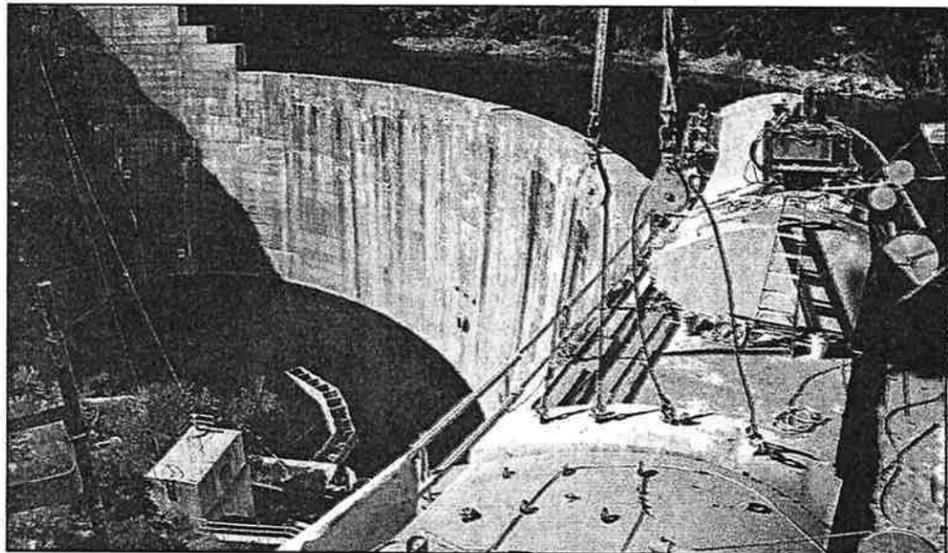
"We're finding our place in this great big ecosystem," Henke said. "We have to show the whole world we can do this."

Los Angeles Times

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Photos by CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times



The 52-year-old Matilija Dam is cracking with age. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, left, mans the controls as a crane removes the first piece from the structure.

Babbitt Takes Symbolic First Step in Removal of Silt-Choked Matilija Dam

By JENIFER RAGLAND
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

OJAI—Manning the pedals and levers of a towering blue crane, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt pulled a 16,000-pound chunk from the mammoth face of Matilija Dam on Thursday morning, the first symbolic step in the demolition of the aging 20-story-tall structure.

"Now that was real power," Babbitt said with a grin as he wiped sweat from his brow and greeted an applauding crowd of politicians, environmentalists and community leaders. More

than 100 people gathered at the top of the dam north of Ojai to celebrate the kickoff of a demonstration project that will test methods for tearing down the concrete structure.

Local dignitaries—including Assemblywoman Hannah-Beth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara) and Ventura County Supervisors Kathy Long and John Flynn—characterized the event as the first real movement toward razing the crumbling structure, a daunting job that could cost up to \$170 million.

"This is a historic moment for me," Flynn
Please see DAM, B3

VENTURA COUNTY
REPORTER 10-5-2000

Demolition derby

Babbitt visit raises hopes of Matilija Dam removal

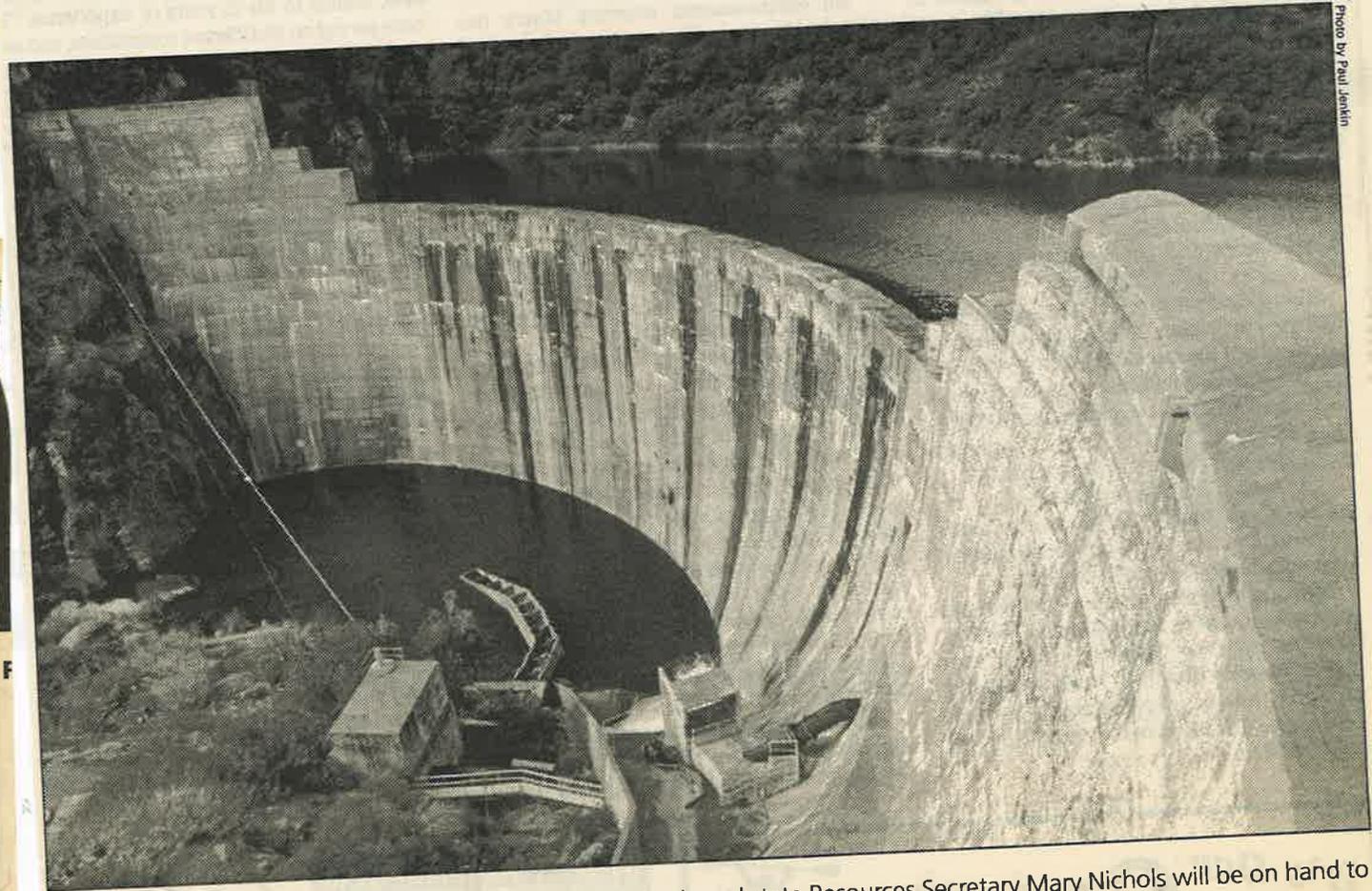
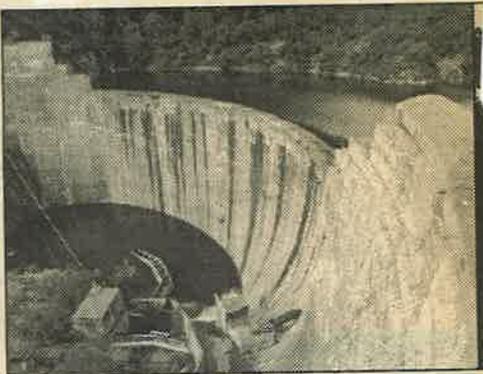


Photo by Paul Jenkins

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, Congressman Elton Gallegly and state Resources Secretary Mary Nichols will be on hand to witness the removal of a 90-foot long section of Matilija Dam Oct. 12.



News 11 F

It'll be a momentous occasion for local environmentalists Oct. 12 when U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt steps onto a crane to witness a demonstration of the removal of Matilija Dam.

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by Ryan Holter

U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt will step aboard a crane within the Los Padres National Forest on Oct. 12 as the first significant chunk of the Matilija Dam is ceremoniously removed.

By dismantling the remaining portion of spillway that once spanned the entire width of the dam, officials will demonstrate manageable methods of tackling the largest dam removal project in the United States. Additionally, officials will evaluate costs of the concrete removal and the environmental impacts of their methods during the demonstration project.

The Ventura County Flood Control District, the lead agency in the dam's removal, has selected a contractor to remove the five-foot-thick rim of concrete, measuring 90 feet long at the top of the dam. The targeted section is above the water flow of the dam and will be sliced into roughly 16,000 pound sections. The debris will be temporarily stockpiled behind the dam until it can be hauled away and recycled.

Dam removal supporters hope Babbitt's visit will bring state and local officials together to illustrate the significance and immense scale of removing a dam measuring 160 feet in height and 620 feet in width.

"It is an important step in bringing momentum to the process of decommissioning the dam," said Sergio Vargas, a senior engineer with the Ventura County Flood Control District. "It is not an easy task and it would be difficult for the Flood Control District alone to handle something of this magnitude. By having the interest and involvement of the federal government and other agencies, it will help in the long run to achieve the decommissioning of the dam."

Certainly, interest in removing Matilija Dam was boosted in April when the national environmental group American Rivers listed the Ventura River as the third most endangered river in the nation.

"Watersheds, river systems and native fish can't survive in a segmented landscape," Bruce Babbitt said in a written statement. "And that drives us to think of the power of restoration. Of course, that's the reason I've been out on the landscape over the past few months, carrying around a sledgehammer."

"If you have a dam that's going down, I'm going to be there. Dam building is just one example of how we broke up rivers and segmented landscapes. We built 75,000 dams in the course of our nation's development. Yet we don't understand the price that would be paid [for native fish species]."

Babbitt continued, "Dams—the way we look at them and measure their benefits against their costs—take us into the act of restoration."

Congressman Elton Gallegly, California

Resources Agency Secretary Mary Nichols and other local officials will join Secretary Babbitt at the demonstration. It is this attention from key political figures which supporters hope will prioritize the Matilija Dam nationally and provide funding to meet the continuing costs as estimates for the total dam removal soar from \$20 to \$180 million.

In comparison, removal of the brim dur-

ing the Oct. 12 demonstration project will cost \$435,000. Funding is provided by grants from the California Coastal Conservancy, Ventura County Flood Control district, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the cities of Ventura, Port Hueneme and Oxnard.

A series of studies will follow the demonstration project and are necessary before

any further dam dismantling is done. A study will examine the characteristics of the estimated six million cubic yards of sediment trapped behind the dam—sediment best placed on Ventura's eroding beaches 16 serpentine miles downstream. Sediment is expected to consume the remaining water capacity of the reservoir behind the dam in

Continued on Page 12

Demolition *continued*

15 to 20 years.

"The Bureau of Reclamation has conducted preliminary studies and will likely continue to if the funding comes through," said Paul Jenkin, coordinator of the Surfrider Foundation's Ventura chapter. "There appears to be strong support for the removal by agencies throughout Ventura County and from the California Coastal Conservancy, who has provided funding for the demonstration project."

At the demonstration, more than 200 people are expected to crowd together at the space-restricted dam site. In anticipation of the limited public access, the Matilija Coalition, a collaboration of local environmental groups, is organizing a separate public tour on Saturday, Oct. 14, from 10 a.m. to noon. The tour will include a presentation from a Ventura County Flood Control District engineer and an interpretive walk by a local naturalist examining the historical and current ecological issues surrounding the dam.

"Dams play an interesting role in an entire ecosystem when they are constructed, effecting more than the flow of sediment," Paul Jenkin said. "Because dams restrict migratory fish such as the salmon and steelhead [trout] that rely on free-flowing rivers, salmon fisheries on the West Coast are in dire condition today. The Endangered Species Act really requires something be done about it, and dam removal is the only way to solve that problem." ■

End is near for Matilija Dam

Project to aid
Ventura River
Ahead runs

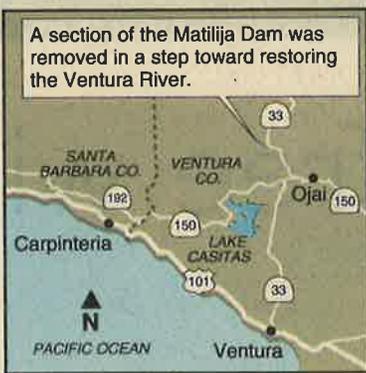
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt stepped into a crane cab and tore off part of a dam that blocked a major tributary to the Ventura River for more than a century. His demolition work is the latest move in a nationwide campaign to breach old dams. Conservationists said removing the Matilija Dam along Matilija Creek will help restore steelhead and return mountain sediment to Ventura County beaches. "It was a little hard to believe," said Capelli, a member of Friends of the Ventura River, said after it removed a 16,000-pound concrete slab from the dam's face. "It has been sitting up there for over a century, and I don't think there are too many people who thought it would be lifted off, at least in my lifetime. It was an historic event."

The 200-foot-tall dam, about 20 miles north of Ventura, was built in 1948 to control floods and store water. Since then, it has blocked an estimated 5 million to 7 million yards of sediment, enough to fill all Ventura County beaches 1 foot deep. The layer of sand and silt behind the dam is estimated to be 100 feet deep. The concrete face also prevents sediment from returning upriver to replenish beds. The number of steelhead swimming up the Ventura River dropped from about 100 a year before the dam was built to 10 today.

Babbitt's event was the first in a demonstration project to determine whether the dam can be removed in layers. The sediment piled up behind it presents the difficult challenge to breach the dam.

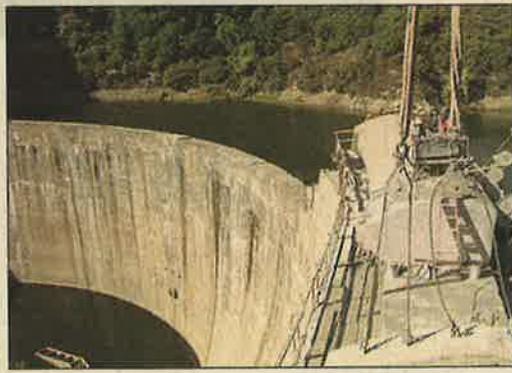
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MICHELLE SHAPIRO / NEWS-PRESS

Bureau of Reclamation study. It could cost as little as \$20 million if officials choose to let nature move the sediment downstream by gradually removing the dam over about 20 years.

After determining how best to breach the dam, federal, state and Ventura County agencies will seek funding. Babbitt said the cooperative effort, which brought about 200



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

Above, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt uses a crane to remove a slab of concrete from the Matilija Dam. The 200-foot-tall dam was built in 1948 to control floods and store water.

people to the dam site Thursday, should serve as a model for the rest of California and the nation.

The Interior Department has been examining the nation's 75,000 dams to determine which have environmental costs that outweigh their usefulness. Dams are a barricade for native fish species and collect tons of silt.

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issue by presiding over several "dam-bustings," including the dismantling of Saeltzer Dam last week in Northern California.

None of those projects, however, compares with the work required to take down the Matilija.

The Saeltzer Dam is about 20 feet high, and the tallest of the dams removed in the last two decades was about 40 feet.

Public input sought on Matilija Dam removal

From staff reports

Federal and county officials will hold a public meeting Thursday to gather input on tearing down Matilija Dam.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will use the comments for an environmental impact statement and a \$4.2 million feasibility

study on restoring steelhead salmon and replenishing beach sand. The 54-year-old dam, originally built for water storage and flood control, is blamed for both problems.

Today, some 7 million cubic yards of silt — enough to fill 437 football fields — sits behind the

obsolete dam.

A U.S. Bureau of Reclamation study estimated removal costs at between \$22 million and \$200 million.

In October 2000, then Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt removed a sizable portion of the dam as part of a \$435,000 demonstration project.

Thursday's meeting will be from 7 to 9 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors chambers at the County Government Center, 800 S. Victoria Ave., Ventura.

On the Net:

www.matilijadam.org.

www.rain.org/~pjenkin/matilija.

VC Star 10-13-2000



HANDS-ON: U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt controls a crane to lift a concrete piece from atop Matilija Dam, north of Ojai, on Thursday. It was a symbolic start to removal of the dam, which will allow silt behind it to eventually replenish sand on county shores.

Staff photo by James Glover II

Babbitt tears into Matilija Dam

REMOVAL: By Charles Levin
Staff writer

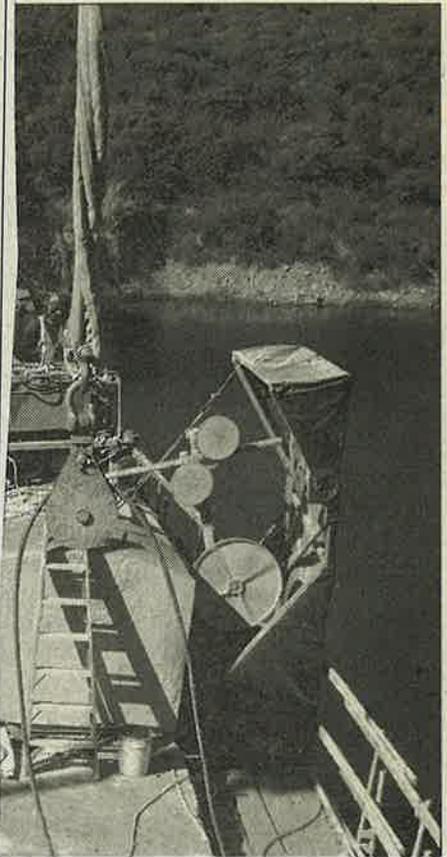
Interior Secretary Babbitt raises port for

dozen dam removals so far, often appearing with a sledgehammer to break up the first bits of concrete. But Thursday called for Babbitt to pull a crane lever.

"People will look back to this moment and say we were here at the creation and opening of a new era in dam removal."

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FROM THE FRONT PAGE



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Staff photo by James Glover II

PIECE BY PIECE: Workers prepare to remove a large chunk of Matilija Dam on Thursday as part of a demonstration project.

DAM: Babbitt heralds project as new chapter in environmental history

Continued from A1

American environmental history did the coming century of storage," Babbitt told more than 100 onlookers.

Thursday's chunk removal as part of a much-hyped demonstration project that officials hope will draw more attention to the deteriorating 52-year-old dam north of Ojai.

Originally built for water supply and flood control, the dam has become obsolete, robbed beaches of fresh sand, and prevented endangered steelhead out from migrating upstream spawning grounds, environmentalists say.

Officials estimate that up to 7 million cubic yards of silt sit behind the dam — enough to fill 37 football fields 1 foot deep.

The dam sits on Matilija Creek, a tributary of the Ventura River, 15.6 miles upstream from the ocean.

At 168 feet high and 620 feet wide, the dam would be the largest ever torn down in the United States, officials say.

Removing the dam gained new urgency this year when the Washington, D.C.-based American Rivers environmental group declared the Ventura River the nation's third most endangered river.

Babbitt joined a host of state and local officials at Thursday's demonstration and praised the strong consensus of support behind the project — a stark contrast to others he has worked on.

"I stand in awe of what you have achieved," Babbitt said.

Dam removal means a chance to "look deeply at the mistakes of the past," Babbitt said. "We've learned that it really works."

For example, after the removal of Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River in Maine two years ago, fish returned within a year, "as if by kind of a primal

memory," he said.

But the previous dam removals have been much smaller, Babbitt said, and Matilija offers the chance to create a model for larger jobs.

Using a crane situated behind the dam, Babbitt on Thursday removed a relatively small slab of concrete from its upper-right-hand corner. With another crane, crews had lifted a sizably larger chunk minutes before.

Crews had pre-cut the slabs on Tuesday with a diamond wire-cutting saw, one of three possible removal techniques the county is testing, said Jeff Pratt, county assistant director of public works. Crews will shave a total of 90 feet from the dam over the next three weeks, he said.

Other possible methods include filling holes in the dam with chemicals that expand and cause concrete to break up, or using a hydraulic jackhammer-like device, Pratt said.

The sediment is a much bigger problem, and officials have no answers yet on how to remove and dispose of it.

Babbitt said toxins often embedded in such sediment can also pose problems. But they're found more often in industrialized rivers, he said.

There have been some forest fires in the Matilija area, which can contribute to toxic runoff, said Federico Barajas, dam program manager with the Bureau of Reclamation. Initial tests of the silt, however, show no toxins, Barajas said. Further tests will follow.

The biggest reason for Thursday's hoopla was to draw attention to the dam itself in hopes of raising more money for removal, Pratt said.

The demonstration project is costing \$435,000, split between the county; cities of Ventura, Port Hueneme and Oxnard; the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; and the state Coastal Conservancy.

Matilija Dam

Location: Along Matilija Creek north of Ojai, 15.6 miles from ocean

Year built: 1948

Purpose: Water supply, flood control

Estimated construction cost: \$682,000

Actual cost: About \$4 million

Initial height: 198 feet

Current height: 168 feet, after being notched in 1965 and 1977

Width: 620 feet

Thickness: 8 feet at crest, 35 feet at base

Original capacity: 7,018 acre-feet

Current capacity: Less than 500 acre-feet

Projected 2020 capacity: 0 acre-feet

Sources: Matilija Coalition, Ventura County Flood Control District, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Complete removal could cost anywhere from \$22 million to \$200 million over 10 to 40 years, according to a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation study. There's no way the local agencies and non-profit organizations can marshal that much cash alone.

A \$3.7 million feasibility study is the next step in the process, said Brian Miller, district chief of staff to Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley.

There are roughly 75,000 dams nationwide, said Babbitt, and competition for federal funding is stiff.

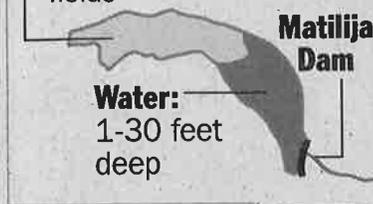
But Babbitt said that if he has his way, Matilija, with its strong local backing, would be "first in line" for federal cash.

Later this month, the Coastal Conservancy is expected to approve contributing another \$1.75 million toward the dam's removal, said Bill Ahern, the conservancy's executive director.

Matilija Lake reservoir

Sediment: 5 million to 7 million cubic yards of sand, gravel and silt; enough to fill 437 football fields

Water: 1-30 feet deep



Staff graphic by Wendy Noda

Environmentalists said they were optimistic about getting money from a variety of public and private sources, as well as continued federal support — even if George W. Bush wins on Nov. 7.

"We're not going to stop with this one piece," said Mark Capelli, executive director of Friends of the River. "This dam can't stay here forever."

— Charles Levin's e-mail address is clevin@insidevc.com.

On the Net: www.rain.org/~pjenkin/matilija

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Babbitt visits doomed Matilija Dam

by Lenny Roberts

U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt led a group of dignitaries visiting Matilija Dam Thursday morning, and echoed their collective wish to have the aging structure removed.

The 53-year-old dam, they agree, has outlived its usefulness and become a detriment to the environment and to the natural habitat of wildlife, namely the steelhead trout.

Ranked third on a list identifying U.S. endangered rivers, the Ventura River's survival depends on the dam's removal, according to a report released earlier this year by American Rivers, a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to protecting and restoring America's rivers.

The report described Matilija Dam as an "impassable roadblock for native Southern California steelhead runs, while contributing to the erosion of popular nearby surfing beaches."

Speaking in support of the dam's



U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt manipulates a massive crane as a 5,000-pound section of Matilija Dam is symbolically removed in a deconstruction demonstration Thursday. Plans are to remove the 53-year-old dam that officials say has outlived its usefulness.



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removal Thursday were Supervisors Kathy Long and John Flynn, Brian Miller, aide to Congressman Elton Gallegly (R-Simi Valley), Assemblywoman Hannah-Beth Jackson, California Trout spokesman Nick DiCroce and Chuck Raysbrook, regional manager of the California Department of Fish and Game. Babbitt recalled hosting the initial meeting of many of those same officials in Washington in 1999, to consider the need to remove the dam. At that time, Flynn asked for federal assistance to cover the costs of removing the dam, and Babbitt pledged to take the necessary steps to begin the process.

The projected undertaking is the largest of its kind in the United States.

"We must look deeply into the task of restoring our mistakes of the past," Babbitt began. "We have the capacity to envision what once was, and then to undertake the hands-on process of restoring the landscape. It's an act of affirmation and an act of fate so we can live in more harmony with creation.

"And as we undertake the act of restoring the waters and watershed, I think that remarkable things happen. We find that when we restore the waters, we restore our community. And this process of restoration has brought all these communities together," referring to the county and state agencies involved, The California Coastal Conservancy, The Wildlife Foundation, private property owners and local environmental groups.



"So I'm here to say to all of you that I stand in awe and admiration of what you have done, and I hope that we can all, by our presence here today, hold this up across California and the country as a model of what we believe the act of restoration can be.

"I didn't bring my sledgehammer today, because when I first saw a picture of this thing, I thought.

'You've got to be kidding.' "

Although Babbitt did not specifically address the cost and time frame for removing Matilija Dam, he said the effort had "We begin this effort with the entire country watching, because this is the first time - this is a new chapter - and we've got to do it right because there are a lot of skeptics out around this country," he cautioned.

He brought applause and laughter from the sun-drenched group of guests by saying, "I'm in the last 120 days of my tenure as secretary of the interior, and that's one of the reasons why I want to blow this sucker up.

"But I think, seriously, that all of us here today, in years to come as this process comes to fruition, are going to look back to this moment and say that we were present at the start. We were here at the creation of a brand-new chapter in American environmental history and the coming century of restoration.

"Keep it up. You're doing great," Babbitt concluded.

After speaking, Babbitt took a quick lesson in operating the massive crane that had been delivered for the occasion, and symbolically removed a 5,000-

pound section from the top of the dam.

The 198-foot dam was built in 1947 to provide flood control and fresh water for the Ojai Valley, but massive amounts of sand and silt have accumulated behind the dam, rendering it all but useless for that purpose.

The estimated 7 million cubic yards of sediment choking the reservoir prevents sand from flowing downstream to replenish the coastal ecosystem, and engineers estimate that if the sediment could be piled one foot deep, it would cover 3,000 football fields.

In April, Jim Edmondson, conservation director for California Trout, said that Matilija Dam has evolved into nothing more than a retaining wall, holding enough sediment to add 30 feet of sand to each beach in Ventura County. At its deepest point, sediment in a mile-long stretch has been measured at 70 feet.

Prior to its construction, 5,000 adult steelhead annually returned to the Ventura River. Today, they are counted in dozens

Babbitt urged Gallegly and California's senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein to continue to work to secure federal funding for the removal project that could run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

The least expensive and most time-consuming method to restore the river's flow would be to gradually remove the dam, allowing for the natural flow of the materials to the ocean. Another method would be to excavate the material and construct a conveyor

system or pipeline to the ocean. The third alternative is to excavate the material and truck it to a landfill or some similar place, with the residual sand transported to the beaches.

If funding is secured, the project could begin as soon as 2003.

Thursday's deconstruction ceremony at the dam cost some \$425,000, and was funded by The California Coastal Conservancy, County Flood Control which owns the dam, the state Dept. of Fish and Wildlife, and the cities of Ventura, Oxnard and Port Hueneme.

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