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Pollution fine aids dam's end

MATILIJA: \$500,000 of Texaco settlement going to effort to pull down obsolete structure.

By Charles Levin
Staff writer

Plans to tear down the obsolete Matilija Dam north of Ojai have received a \$500,000 boost, thanks to the settlement of a federal pollution case against oil-giant Texaco.

Texaco agreed last month to pay a \$4.5 million fine after pleading guilty to two counts of violating the federal Clean Water Act, said Joseph O. Johns, U.S. assistant attorney with the Department of Justice's Environmental Crimes section in Los Angeles.

Texaco was cited for discharging oil- and grease-laden waste water into Dominguez Channel in Los Angeles in January 1995, and between 2,000 and 8,000 gallons of petroleum-contaminated waste water into Pre-fumo Creek in San Luis Obispo in March 1997, Johns said Monday.

As with similar settlements, most of the money — \$4 million — will go to community efforts to clean the environment, Johns said. Of that, \$500,000 was specifically earmarked in the

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settlement for studies and other costs related to tearing down the 52-year-old Matilija

— Paul Jenkin, director of the Matilija Coalition

Dam, Johns said. The nonprofit National Fish and Wildlife Foundation will administer the \$500,000.

Johns said the Justice Department also will keep the dam project in mind when working on future pollution settlements.

Matilija was built for water storage and flood control. But now, 7 million cubic yards of silt sit behind the dam — enough to fill 437 football fields a foot deep.

Environmentalists say the obsolete dam has robbed beaches of fresh sand and prevented endangered steelhead trout from migrating upstream to spawning grounds.

Removing the dam has bipartisan support from the community and from Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Simi Valley. At 168 feet high and 620 feet wide, however, the dam would be the largest ever torn down in the United States.

A U.S. Bureau of Reclamation study estimated removal costs at between \$20 million and \$180 million.

So far, local and federal agencies have spent \$750,000 on an appraisal study. This included a demonstration project in October,

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feasibility study

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when former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt lifted a large chunk of the dam with a crane.

The next step, a feasibility study, will cost \$4.2 million, said Federico Barajas, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation project manager.

Ventura County and the federal government are supposed to split the cost, Barajas said. But with the county unable to pay, the state's Coastal Conservancy has ponied up \$1.75 million for the dam's removal, Barajas said. President Bush has earmarked another \$400,000 in his 2001-'02 budget for the project, he said.

Johns said he approached the county with the idea of using money pollution fines for Matilija

ja about a year ago after reading a story about the dam.

"I said, 'Hey, this is a project that is definitely a good work, if we have a major settlement go down,'" Johns said.

Paul Jenkin, director of the Matilija Coalition, praised the settlement. "One of the things we've been trying to do is find creative sources of funding," Jenkin said. "This kind of funding is going to be essential for the ultimate removal of the dam."

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