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## Matilija Dam removal accord reached

by Chris Wilson

Government officials have taken another step toward tearing down the massive concrete chunk that holds back the third-most endangered river in the United States.

The Matilija Dam Steering Committee has urged the Ventura County Board of Supervisors to sign an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers to initiate a \$4 million feasibility study that will identify federal interest in ecosystem revival opportunities and the likelihood for Matilija dam's full-scale removal. Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt visited the Dam in October with a cadre of dignitaries, who concluded the 53-year-old structure had become a detriment to the environment and to the natural habitat of wildlife, namely the steelhead trout.

"We have the capacity to envision what once was and then to undertake the hands-on process of restoring the landscape," Babbitt said when he visited the valley last autumn. "We were here at the creation of a brand-new chapter in American environmental history and the coming century of restoration. Keep it up."



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American Rivers, a non-profit conservation organization dedicated to protecting and restoring America's rivers, issued a report last year that described Matilija Dam as an "impassable roadblock for native Southern California steelhead runs while contributing to the erosion of popular nearby surfing beaches."

Steve Higgs, a conservation associate of dam programs for American Rivers, said by phone from Washington D.C. on Thursday the aged, silt-filled dam had outlived its usefulness and was not providing any significant benefits. "Consequently, there's a great amount to gain by removing the dam," Higgs said.

A news release issued by Ventura County Supervisors Steve Bennett's office stated complex studies will be done to determine the methods and feasibility of ecosystem restoration, including dam removal alternatives. The study is considered a major milestone in the possibility of dam removal for environmental restoration purposes. Options include notching the dam or leaving it in place are other alternatives that will be investigated.

California's 23rd District Congressman Elton Gallegly has supported the including more money for the study in the president's budget for next fiscal year. A California Coastal Conservancy grant will bare most of the county's share of the cost.

The Matilija Dam Steering Committee, chaired by Supervisors John Flynn and Bennett, includes local environmental group representatives acting through the Matilija Coalition, as well as

representatives from many state and federal agencies and nonprofit groups.

"This is a major project with tremendous benefits for Ventura County. That's why we need the support of all of the agencies and groups that comprise the multi-agency committee," said Flynn. The Steering Committee's recommendations will be presented to the board of supervisors by June 12.

The first major phase of the study will include a public workshop, environmental surveys and geotechnical field investigations.

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[Back to the news](#)