

Deal struck to demolish San Clemente Dam

Project would restore wildlife habitat

By DANIEL LOPEZ, Herald Staff Writer
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The proposal to demolish San Clemente Dam and restore wildlife habitat on the Carmel River is gaining momentum.

Numerous public officials joined executives of California American Water on Monday at Mission Ranch in Carmel to sign a declaration pledging their support for the project.

The \$84 million dam removal and river reroute could be the first project of its kind in the United States, officials said.

"Things like this have not been done before; people just haven't torn down dams and rerouted rivers," said Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel. "It takes a lot of organizations to come forward."

The plan to demolish the dam and reroute the Carmel River through San Clemente Creek, leaving about 2.5 million cubic yards of sediment buildup in the reservoir, was revived in November.

Cal Am, which owns the dam, said that about nine months earlier, it was changing course after being unable to reach an agreement with the California Coastal Conservancy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration concerning the project's long-term liabilities.

The fear is the sediment could be released after the structure is removed.

Farr said the hope is that liability issues can be resolved by having the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management or another federal agency get involved to accept the responsibility.

"Projects like this are all about partnerships," said Michael Chrisman, secretary of the California Department of Natural Resources.

Chrisman said the dam removal and river reroute could be the model used to plan similar projects in California and around the country.

San Clemente Dam was built in 1921 and designed to hold about 1,400 acre-feet of water.

At the time, it was a "marvel of construction and engineering," said Cal Am president Rob MacLean.

The dam is no longer useful, holding only about 125 acre-feet of water, and it poses a safety risk, MacLean said.

In the early 1990s, the state Department of Water Resources' Division of Dam Safety declared the structure unsafe. Officials say the dam could collapse in the event of a magnitude-5.5 earthquake on the Tularcitos Fault, which the dam straddles, or in a magnitude-7 or greater earthquake on the San Andreas Fault.

An environmental impact report issued in 2007 by the Department of Water Resources and the Army Corps of Engineers evaluated five options to bring the dam into compliance with current standards.

The options included reinforcing the dam by buttressing it with added concrete.

Environmental groups have favored demolishing the dam and rerouting the river because that would provide the greatest benefit to wildlife and the river ecosystem.

Clive Sanders, president of the Carmel River Watershed Conservancy, said Monday that removing the dam will allow the river to flow naturally, making it easier for steelhead trout to spawn.

The fish ladders on the dam are not efficient because the fish have to line up to get over, he said.

The planned restoration work will include resting pools for the fish.

"The project is very exciting," Sanders said. "We think it can be done."

Cal Am's share of the demolition cost will be \$50 million, based on what it would cost to buttress the dam, and 928 acres around the dam will be donated as parkland.

Cal Am has said it will seek to pass the cost on to its ratepayers.

The Coastal Conservancy will contribute \$34 million. Supporters of the project say the agreement signed Monday is the first step to securing the funding and moving the project forward.

"What this collaboration represents is a plan that people want to fulfill," Farr said. "It's great to just have everyone focused on getting this done."

MacLean said demolition work could begin in 2013, with the project completed in 2016.