

A Dam Past Its Prime

Constructed in 1947 by the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, Matilija Dam was intended to provide a local water supply, while offering flood protection for downstream communities. During the 60 years of its life, the build-up of sediment behind the dam has undermined both of those original functions. The initial storage capacity of the reservoir was 7,018 acre-feet, but today it holds less than 500 acre-feet of water.

Over time, it has become clear that the presence of the dam has adversely impacted the ecosystems of Matilija Creek and the Ventura River. Not only does the dam prevent the natural flow of sand and sediment from the mountains to the beaches, it also blocks the endangered steelhead trout from swimming upstream from the ocean to the place of their ancestral spawning and rearing. Steelhead depend on the cool, year-round waters found only in the upper reaches of the watershed. Today, over half the original steelhead spawning habitat lies locked behind Matilija Dam.

Faced with a host of obstacles by a dam that has outlived its usefulness, a multi-stakeholder effort was launched in the spring of 1999 to assess the viability of dam removal and ecosystem restoration. This effort was led by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and culminated in the publication of an appraisal study. On October 12, 2000, then Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt participated in a demonstration project at Matilija Dam that evaluated the effectiveness of various concrete removal techniques. With more than 250 people in attendance, this event propelled the project into the national limelight and generated an outpouring of public interest.

In June 2001, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in partnership with Ventura County Watershed Protection District, initiated a feasibility study to assess the extent of Federal participation in the project. In an effort to reach a consensus among the many stakeholders, work groups were formed to address environmental concerns, public outreach, recreation, plan formulation, technical studies, and funding opportunities. The Feasibility Study was completed in 2004, and in July 2005 the Ventura County Watershed Protection District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers signed the Pre-construction Engineering and Design Agreement. That action signaled the initiation of the next phase of the project – designing the elements necessary to accomplish dam deconstruction and restoration of the Ventura River Watershed.