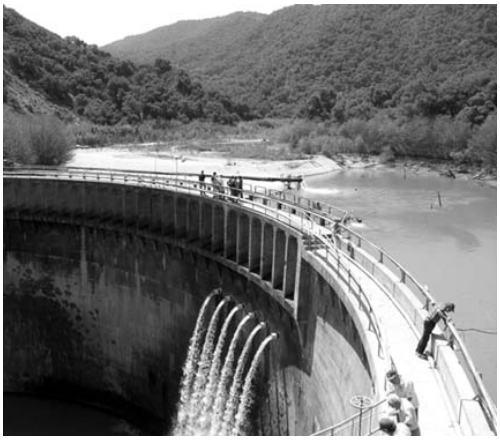
The Old Dam–A $70 Million Question for Cal-Am

CAL-Am and its Monterey Peninsula ratepayers could be facing a $70 million cleanup problem on the Carmel River if state and federal officials decide the 82-year-old San Clemente Dam needs to be torn down and removed.



Cal-Am has proposed a $25 million to $30 million alternative to thicken the concrete dam and strengthen its footings so the structure could withstand a major earthquake on a fault a few miles away.

If the federal government or the state's Division of the Safety of Dams decides that's not good enough, Cal-Am would have to spend an estimated $60 million to $70 million to tear down the 85-foot tall structure and remove the 1,500 acre-feet of sediment that has accumulated behind it.

To put the costs in perspective, Cal-Am takes in about $25 million a year for all its water sales to the 112,000 residents and 3,200 businesses on the Peninsula. The Water District is monitoring closely because it regulates the Peninsula sources of the water Cal-Am sells, and it is charged with protecting the natural resources involved. The San Clemente Dam reservoir has helped keep water in the river and regulate the flows.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is waiting for a biological opinion from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries scientists before handing down a decision on removal or fortification. The scientists have been signaling doubts about leaving the concrete dam in place, Army engineers and state dams officials said during a September meeting in Monterey.

The federal scientists are concerned that leaving the old dam would cause more harm to steelhead fish and red-legged frogs now protected by the Endangered Species Act.

In addition, the state's dam safety experts questioned the logic of spending millions of dollars to maintain a structure that has lost its value as a water supply device.

Over the years the dam has stopped sand, silt and cobble that would normally move down the river with the water. The muddy sediment that has collected since it was built in 1921 has filled in most of the space intended to be a reservoir for the Peninsula, leaving only about 10% of the original capacity for water.

If the dam should collapse in an earthquake, that wall of mud and any water with it would pour into Carmel Valley, causing damage for miles downriver. That possibility was identified in 1992, when engineers determined the old dam couldn't withstand a 6.5 magnitude earthquake on the Tularcitos Fault, which is considered seismically possible.

Twelve years of studies and evaluations, including at least two environmental impact reports, explored other options, including dredging and restoring the reservoir to its original capacity. In addition to the expense and the potential for lawsuits, it is not practical to haul up to 300,000 truckloads of muddy sediment down Carmel Valley Road and through the Peninsula to a remote dump.

State officials in September said it might be possible to move the sediment to nearby sites, depending on the outcome of an environmental impact report. But that would push the removal option to an estimated $60 million to $70 million.

Cal-Am has started emergency safety procedures–punching holes in the dam to release what water was left behind it in order to take some pressure off the structure; installing monitoring equipment; and working out emergency notifications with the Carmel Valley Fire Department.

Permit Denied–NO New Dam

BOTH the Water Board and the State's Public Utilities Commission formally denied Cal-Am's request to build a new dam on the Carmel River, a proposal the utility lost interest in more than two years ago.

The plan was to build a dam at the edge of Los Padres National Forest and create a 24,000 acre-foot reservoir that would supply the Monterey Peninsula with water, hold excess as a drought reserve and improve the year-round stream flow in the environmentally damaged river.

It was a project originally designed by the Water District in the 1980s and '90s as the New Los Padres Dam. The necessary state and federal permits were obtained, but Peninsula voters rejected the plan in 1995, declining to pay for a dam that would aid growth.

Cal-Am adopted the identical plan shortly after that, renamed it the Carmel River Dam and Reservoir Project, and asked the District to transfer the state and federal permits to the privately owned water company that wouldn't need voter approval to build it.

After years of controversy, Cal-Am put the plan on hold in 2001 while the state looked for alternatives to the dam, as directed by legislation from then-Assemblyman Fred Keeley. Seawater desalination emerged as the leading preference.

The Water Board asked Cal-Am in January 2002 to withdraw its application for the dam permit, but Cal-Am declined.

After a public hearing in August, the Board voted 5-2 to reject the unwanted dam. Now that Cal Am's request has been denied, the state and federal permits remain in the hands of the Water District.