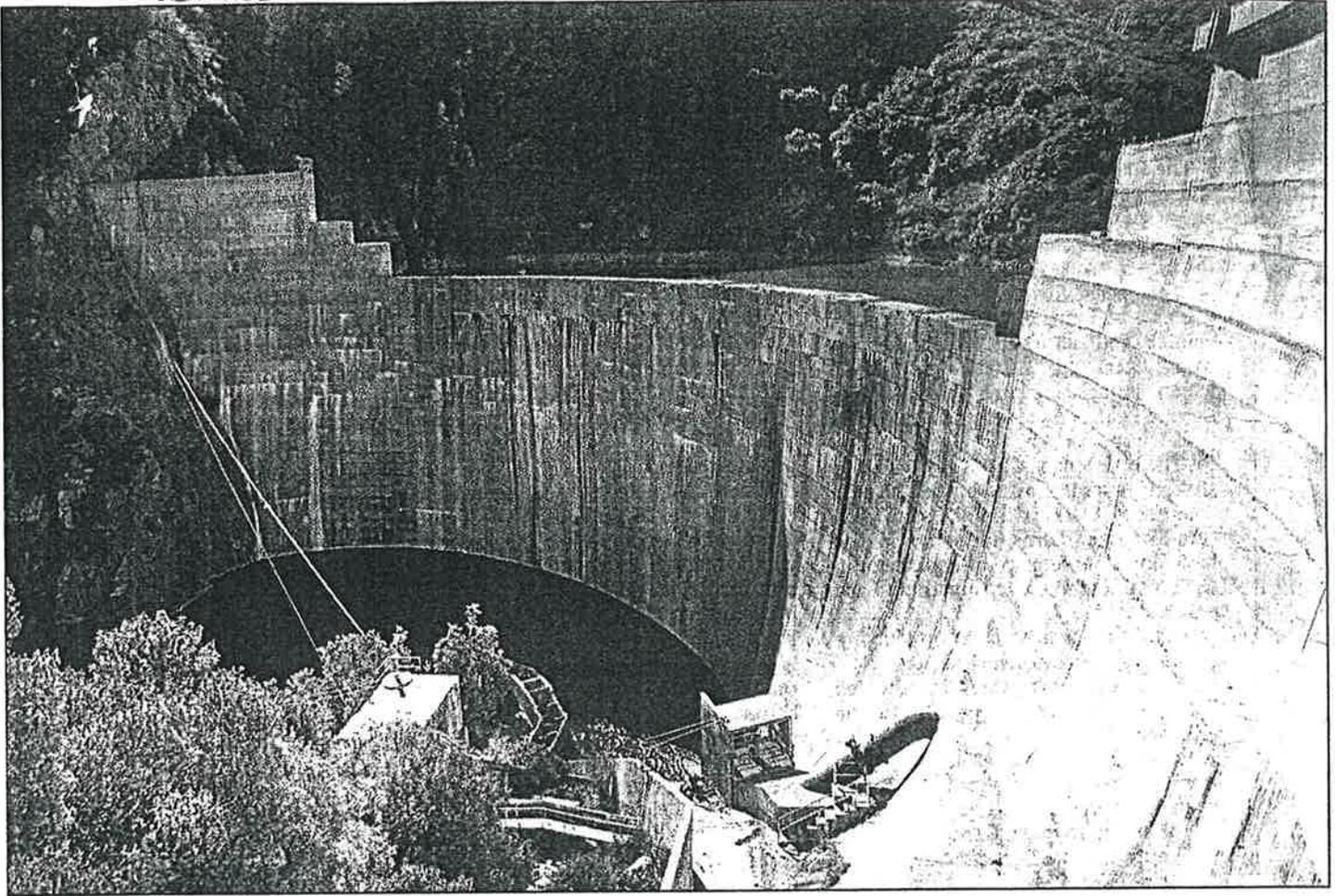


Dams

11-4-98

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COURTESY OF: VENTURA CO. MUSEUM OF HISTORY & ART



BRYAN CHAN / Los Angeles Times

Matilija Dam was built in 1948 to capture sediment to reduce flood risks downstream and to store water for growers and residents.

# Trickle of Support

## To Some Supervisors, Removing Old Matilija Dam Is an Idea That Holds Water

By GARY POLAKOVIC  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**A** proposal to tear down a dam in the Ventura County back country sounds radical, but it is an idea that just might work.

At least the county Board of Supervisors seems to think so and is intrigued enough to encourage the idea, although it stopped short of endorsing the proposal at its meeting Tuesday.

Supervisor Susan Lacey, whose district includes much of the Ventura River, said removing Matilija Dam north of Ojai holds appeal as a way to let sand flow to fast-eroding beaches.

Supervisor John Flynn said removing the dam would help save steelhead, an

ocean-going trout he used to catch from the river 40 years ago, but that is now sliding toward extinction.

And Supervisor Kathy Long, whose district includes the dam, indicated that the proposal has enough merit that she would like to find a way to get it done.

"We've got a real good chance to do something major here. There's not anything divisive here. We need to go forward," Flynn said.

For now, the dam is safe. The board took no action on the proposal, preferring instead to encourage interested parties to work together to find a way to remove the dam. The county flood control agency owns the structure.

Costs of removing the dam are every bit as imposing as the concrete monolith

straddling the upper reaches of the Ventura River.

The Casitas Municipal Water District, which operates the dam, says a study by UC Santa Barbara puts the cost for removal at about \$75 million. The supervisors said the county cannot afford that and would have to find money elsewhere.

Nevertheless, advocates of tearing down Matilija Dam were undaunted. They say they are not expecting much from the board at this point. Indeed, they say they are concentrating efforts on uniting various groups and agencies to tear down the dam.

"It's not that there are political obstacles, there are funding obstacles," said John Buse of the Environmental Defense Center.

Matilija Dam is under scrutiny because

**Please see DAM, B3**

11-4-98

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Photos by BRYAN CHAN / Los Angeles Times

Silt and dirt have built up behind Matilija Dam north of Ojai. Removal of the dam is being pushed.

## DAM: Groups Push to Remove Structure

### Continued from B1

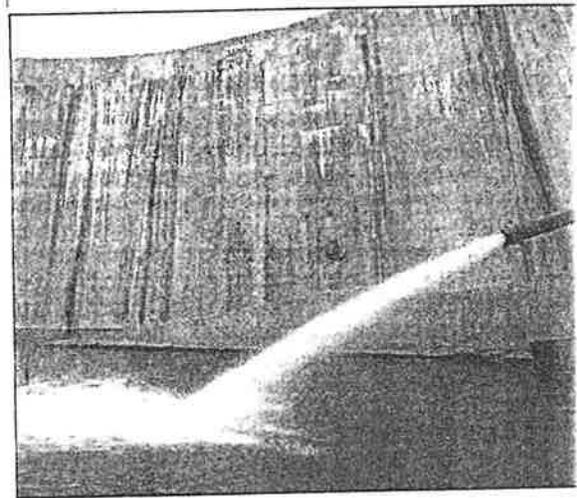
critics say it has outlived its purpose and does more harm than good. Built in 1948, it was designed to capture sediment to reduce flood risks downstream and to store water for growers and residents in the Ojai area.

But today, the dam holds little water and does not hold back sediment because it is full of dirt. Meanwhile, it blocks 20 miles of spawning grounds that steelhead could use, officials say.

The case for removal is being championed by Ed Henke, a former Ventura resident now living in Oregon. He laments the loss of the fish, which he used to catch in local streams when he was a boy in the 1930s. Henke, who calls the dam "a gigantic public nuisance," plans to present his case to the Beach Erosion Authority for Control Operations and Nourishment at 9 a.m. Friday at Carpinteria City Hall, 5775 Carpinteria Ave.

In an Oct. 22 letter to Henke, William T. Hogarth, regional administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said removal of Matilija Dam would be "one of the most beneficial actions that could be taken to help rebuild the steelhead population on the Ventura River." The letter also says water diversions at Robles Diversion Dam downstream are also an obstacle to fish migration.

But removing dams is time-consuming and complicated. Environmental studies must be done. Flood control concerns must be addressed. Water supplies need to be protected. It takes years to answer all those questions, said Mike Gaudin, Interior Department spokesman.



Water gushes from drainage pipe at base of dam

Nonetheless, the idea of removing dams across the West is rapidly gaining favor among fisherman recreational river users, environmentalists, biologists, Indian tribes and some water agencies. Plummeting salmon populations up and down the West Coast have forced a reevaluation of dams.

The fisheries service is studying whether to remove four big dams considered harmful to salmon from the lower Snake River in the Pacific Northwest. The agency will make a recommendation by the end of 1991.

Some economists argue that so-called in-stream values, resulting when rivers flow free, have more economic value than storing the water in reservoir. Dams also provide 25% of California's electric energy, although none of it comes from Matilija Dam.