

Siskiyou concerns are being addressed

County supervisors believe staying involved in water talks is critical to future

By TY BEAVER
H&N Staff Writer
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Stakeholders involved in discussions about removal of four hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River are trying to address Siskiyou County's concerns.

Three of the four dams and two-thirds of the Klamath River are within the California county. Siskiyou County Supervisor Grace Bennett said irrigators, tribes and others in the talks understand the county wants to be involved in dam removal studies and wants impacts addressed, but hesitate to put it in writing.

"They're just on this little ridge, and they keep teetering back and forth," she said.

The five supervisors have their own views on how those talks are proceeding. Siskiyou County remains involved in talks with other stakeholders, something some of the supervisors and others at the table say is critical until a final document is produced.

"Until that happens, we have to be engaged," said Supervisor Ed Valenzuela.

The county is one of the original stakeholders in discussions on dam removal and the broader Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement. The restoration agreement seeks to resolve conflicts over water in the Klamath River watershed.

Supervisors have opposed dam removal since the concept was put forth in drafts of the restoration agreement more than two years ago.

Dam removal opponents in the county have several concerns, from the impacts to real and assessed property values around the reservoirs created by the dams to the loss of hydroelectric power. Supervisors also have district-specific concerns. Supervisor Marcia Armstrong's large Fifth District includes residents downriver of the dams. The unknown liability of millions of cubic yards of sediment behind the dams has kept Armstrong and her constituents strongly opposed to dam removal.

Bennett said a fish hatchery near her district surrounding the county seat of Yreka receives cold water from the bottom of one of the reservoirs. With the dams gone, she's afraid the hatchery will take cold water from Fall Creek, which is Yreka's only safe source of freshwater.

The county continues to send its legal counsel, Tom Guarino, to represent it at continuing discussions on dam removal. Greg Addington, executive director of Klamath Water Users Association, said he's worked with Guarino and appreciates his continued participation.

"I take it at face value that he's there to participate in good faith," Addington said.

Addington said he also understands the supervisors' frustration with not having all the assurances they were told of in writing yet. Many conversations are going on about dam removal and not all of them have been put to paper, he said. Irrigators also are waiting for some of their addressed concerns to be put in print.

For those in Siskiyou County, participation in talks doesn't always mean contentment. In a commentary published in the Herald and News in early August, Supervisor Michael Kobseff called dam removal mindless and called on PacifiCorp, owner of the dams, to

push for dam recertification. He offered other ideas to provide water for irrigation and improve fish passage.

Seeking assistance

The county also sent letters to U. S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif, and the U. S. Department of Interior, either to seek assistance to assure the county be included in future dam removal studies or to express dismay that the agreement continues to not include the county in the studies.

Bennett said she's bothered that it seems everyone but irrigators around Tulelake are ignored on the issue of dam removal. Armstrong said she is particularly frustrated by the continued lack of regard for the county's concerns.

"We've been hammering on it for a full year now and haven't seen any changes," she said.

Other supervisors, while not entirely happy with negotiations, said they do see other stakeholders trying to accommodate their concerns. Supervisor Jim Cook said last week he's somewhat heartened at assurances the county would participate in unbiased dam removal studies and impacts would be considered.

"They certainly seem to be trying to satisfy our concerns," he said.

Valenzuela and Bennett said it's important the county remain involved in negotiations. The county needs to be made whole and is just trying to negotiate its position, which it can't do unless it is at the table, which other stakeholders appreciate, the supervisors said.

Bennett said that while the county is far from being satisfied with discussions at this point, progress is being made, something she attributes to the county communicating with federal lawmakers and President Barack Obama, as well as sticking to specific issues and concerns in negotiations.

"It's a real fine line and we want to protect everybody," she said.

Requests for comment left with Kobseff Friday morning and afternoon were not returned.

About the agreement

The Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement was developed in closed meetings over several years to address water issues in the Klamath Basin. It calls for removal of four hydroelectric dams on the Klamath River to restore fish passage. It also would help the Klamath Tribes acquire the Mazama Tree Farm and promote a stable water supply for irrigators.

Stakeholders in the agreement are largely in support of the document. Many irrigators off the Klamath Reclamation Project are opposed. Other residents have varying opinions.

Negotiators are crafting a final dam removal agreement after reaching a tentative one in November 2008. A final agreement is due in September.

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