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Bridge means end is nearer for dam

Details

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Ojai Valley News photo by Perry Van Houten

The coalition of stakeholders working for removal of Matilija Dam is represented at Monday's groundbreaking event by (from left) Chris Hooke with the Ventura County Transportation Department, Mary Larson with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Ventura County Supervisor Matt LaVere, Glenn Shephard with the Ventura County Public Works Agency, Sam Jenniches with the California State Coastal Conservancy, and Paul Jenkin with the Matilija Coalition.

Perry Van Houten, *Ojai Valley News Senior Reporter*

County officials and their project partners broke ground June 7 on the first major component of Matilija Dam removal.

Construction work started this week on the Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge in Oak View.

On Monday, the Ventura County Public Works Agency commemorated the start of construction with a groundbreaking ceremony at the bridge site on the Ventura River that included opening remarks by 1st District Supervisor Matt LaVere.

“This is a personal project for me. I grew up about a mile up this river and I spent my childhood playing in it,” LaVere said. “Today really is the culmination of years of hard work from so many of you who are here today; a real diverse group of interests who came together and recognized the importance of removing the dam.”

Removing the dam is necessary to restore the aquatic habitat of Matilija Creek and the Ventura River, to encourage fish passage and restore natural sediment transport, according to stakeholders.

Along with county officials, key project members represented at the groundbreaking included the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the California State Coastal Conservancy and the Matilija Coalition.

“This is a groundbreaking day, in many ways. This is the first big concrete work that’s going to support the eventual removal of the Matilija Dam,” said Glenn Shephard, director of VCPWA-Watershed Protection.

According to Shephard, the start of construction on the new bridge shows the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project is not only making progress but gathering steam. “What’s so exciting about today is building the momentum,” he said. “The coalition is in place that supports building that momentum.”

Along with the Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge, four other infrastructure improvement project will need to be completed before the dam can be taken out, including another bridge, three levees and improvements to the Robles Diversion Facility.

Last year, VCPWA received a \$5 million grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board to fund some of the design work on the other components. The California Coastal Conservancy also provided funding for design, Shephard told the Ojai Valley News.

The Santa Ana Boulevard Bridge project will replace the existing 210-foot-long bridge with a taller, wider 350-foot-long bridge just upstream from the current bridge.

The upgrade will widen the river channel, improve passage and habitat for southern steelhead and other native fish, and allow more sand and cobble to flow to eroding beaches south of the Ventura County Fairgrounds.

“It will pass 50% more flow than the old bridge,” said Chris Hooke, acting director of the Ventura County Transportation Department. “This has been choke point in the Ventura River for a long time.”

The new bridge will also help minimize downstream impacts of removing the dam and ensure the safety of nearby residents from flooding. “The first bridge went in in 1960, and there have been many floods since then that have overtopped or spilled out the sides around the bridge. This new bridge will pass those flows,” said Hooke.

Construction of the new bridge is expected to be completed by the end of next year. The existing bridge will remain in place until the new one is finished.

In May of 2019, VCPWA was awarded a \$13.4 million grant from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to construct the new bridge.

Mary Larson, senior environmental scientist supervisor with CDFW, said models have shown that the new bridge should significantly enhance passage of southern steelhead. “We think the design will be very beneficial to steelhead; that it’ll help remove this pile of debris that has historically accumulated and made it hard for fish to pass upstream,” she said.

Design for the bridge project was funded through a grant from the California State Coastal Conservancy. “We’re interested in habitat restoration, connectivity for habitat linkages, delivery of sand and sediment to the ocean, public access; the whole kit and caboodle,” Coastal Conservancy project manager Sam Jenniches told the Ojai Valley News on-site.

Peter Sheydayi, deputy director with VCPWA-WP and project manager for the Matilija Dam Ecosystem Restoration Project, has been working on the project since 2005.

Since 2017, the county has secured nearly \$25 million in grant funding for dam removal, Sheydayi said.

When asked if the start of actual construction on the new bridge felt a bit like sending your first kid off to college, Sheydayi replied, “Maybe it’s more like sending your 5-year-old off to kindergarten,” he said. “It’s still early. We still got a long way to go, but it’s a good start and we see a lot of successes in our future.”

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