

#7

McCloud River

THREAT: Raising Shasta Dam

STATE:
California

AT RISK:

Sacred cultural sites and river health

SUMMARY

The McCloud River, a river protected by the state Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, is one of California's natural treasures. It was home to the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, who depend on the river for their culture, religion and identity. The river's health and the Tribe's cultural values are threatened by raising the height of Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet, which would drown vital habitat, riverside lands and numerous sacred sites. To protect the river and the Tribe's way of life, the Biden administration must overturn the Trump administration's plan to raise the dam.

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

THE RIVER

The McCloud River flows out of the Cascade Range, draining the rugged conifer forests skirting Mount Shasta. It flows 77 miles to the Pit River, a tributary of the Sacramento River, and currently ends in Shasta Reservoir. Recognizing its rich fish and wildlife habitat, scenic beauty and clean, pristine waters, California protected much of the remaining McCloud River from dam construction under the state Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1989. Several rare and endangered wildlife and plant species are found along the McCloud, including the Shasta snow-wreath, Shasta salamanders, McCloud River redband trout and Pacific fisher.

Since time immemorial, the Winnemem Wintu Tribe has relied on and cared for the river. Fishing and practicing ceremony at sacred sites along the river are central activities to the Tribe's culture and way of life. The completion of Shasta Dam on the Sacramento River in 1945 devastated the health and well-being of the McCloud River and Winnemem Wintu Tribe. The reservoir — the largest in the state — backed up the waters of the Sacramento River, Pit River and 26 miles of the McCloud River for the joint purposes of long-term water storage, flood control, hydropower and protection against saltwater intrusion in the San Joaquin/Sacramento River Delta. The eighth-tallest dam in the U.S. at more than 600 feet tall, Shasta Dam was built without fish passage and had devastating impacts on salmon populations. It displaced tribal members and flooded ancestral lands, burial grounds and most of the Tribe's sacred cultural sites.

THE THREAT

For years, Westlands Water District, the largest irrigation district in the country, has advocated for raising Shasta Dam to provide more water for big agricultural interests in the Central Valley Project. There are other solutions to the water needs of agricultural interests, such as updated reservoir management, improved conservation in agriculture and groundwater banking — actions that can be implemented without sacrificing more of California's already greatly diminished wild rivers.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

AMY MERRILL
American Rivers
(510) 809-8010
amerrill@americanrivers.org

GARY MULCAHY
Winnemem Wintu Tribe
(916) 214-8493
gary@ranchriver.com

RON STORK
Friends of the River
(916) 442-3155
rstork@friendsoftheriver.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/
McCloudRiver2021](https://AmericanRivers.org/McCloudRiver2021)

PHOTO: CAL TROUT

In November 2020, the Trump administration, under the direction of Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt, a former lawyer and lobbyist for Westlands Water District, advanced plans to increase the height of Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet— expanding Shasta Lake by more than 200 billion gallons (or nearly 614,000 acre-feet).

Raising the dam would cause further harm and injustice to sacred sites of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, permanently or seasonally flooding approximately 39 sacred sites along the McCloud River. The project would severely impact the Tribe's ability to practice their culture and religion. In addition, the project would cost taxpayers \$2 billion, not to mention decimating the extraordinary scenic, recreational, fish and wildlife values of the state-scenic McCloud River, flooding more than 5,000 acres of forest and riverside habitat, harming the river's wild trout fishery and the salmon that now have to spawn downstream of the dam. Raising the dam could also increase the risk of loss of life in the event of dam failure in a seismically active region.

Furthermore, increasing the height of Shasta Dam and expanding the size of Shasta Lake is illegal under California law. In 1989, the California Legislature amended the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to protect the McCloud River from a dam raise. Raising Shasta Dam would override California state law and set a dangerous legal precedent for other protected rivers. A state court has ruled that this law also prohibits any California water agency from paying for studies or contraction costs for the dam raise.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Newly appointed U.S. Department of Interior Secretary Deb Haaland has an opportunity to do the right thing and stop this harmful project. Under the direction of Secretary Haaland, Department of Interior staff must complete a swift review of the proposed Shasta Dam raise, fully consider and expose its injustice and illegality, and issue a public determination that the project is infeasible (in part because it is illegal in California under the California Wild and Scenic Rivers Act). The Secretary must then kill the project for good by publishing a Record of Decision that rejects the dam-raise alternatives.