

Two obsolete dams face removal

BLASTS TO OPEN WAY FOR MIGRATING FISH, BUT BARRIERS REMAIN

September 22, 2006

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MediaNews

It isn't Hetch Hetchy, but a dam is coming down.

Two, actually.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, the agency that pipes water from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park to 2.4 million customers in the Bay Area, today will blast to smithereens the last pieces of two antiquated dams along Alameda Creek.

Their removal from the winding canyon high above Fremont will open nearly 20 miles of river to migrating steelhead and salmon, though obstacles remain downstream before ocean-going fish can resume their migration to the sea.

The pair of dams were once a key part of the region's water supply. They were rendered obsolete nearly 70 years ago, when the PUC completed the O'Shaughnessy Dam and buried Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley beneath 300 feet of water.

"It's a beautiful day to say goodbye to a dam," said Jeff Miller, director of the Alameda Creek Alliance, which has spent 10 years trying to restore the creek. He spoke during a tour Thursday atop a pile of rubble that was once a 26-foot-tall wall of concrete across the river.

"It's kind of staggering to see this without the Sunol Dam."

For the utility, the decision to remove the two dams was a no-brainer, PUC General Manager Susan Leal said, even if the removal -- from conception to demolition -- took almost a decade. Demolition costs alone totaled \$1.8 million.

"This is a new PUC, and where we can make improvements, we have to step up," Leal said.

The Niles Dam went up in 1841, built in the middle of Niles Canyon by the brother of Spanish Gen. Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo to power a flour mill. In 1887, the Spring Valley Water Co. -- predecessor to the PUC -- topped Jose de Jesus Vallejo's work with rocks and concrete. Thirteen years later, and a few miles upstream, it built the larger Sunol Dam to bring the creek's waters to San Francisco.

Both dams have been in slow decline since 1934, when the Hetch Hetchy system started delivering Sierra Nevada water to the city. Environmentalists have lately called on the PUC to restore the Hetch Hetchy Valley, a notion the agency has vigorously resisted.

It will be some time before ocean-going fish return. A barrier near the Bay Area Rapid Transit District tracks in Fremont, near the creek's mouth, blocks any migration, as do three inflatable rubber dams operated by the Alameda County Water District. And two miles upstream, a Pacific Gas & Electric pipe blocks passage to promising spawning grounds.

But there is progress: One of the three rubber dams will be demolished next summer. PG&E is working on a way to get fish around its pipe. But getting fish past BART is a \$4 million to \$5 million problem, Miller said.

“We'll never get a historic run back,” he acknowledged. “The goal is to get a self-sustaining, healthy population.”