

**To dam, or just think about it; That is the question
consuming farmers, leaders and activists**

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By Mark Grossi, staff writer

Farmers and Fresno city leaders say the time has come for a new dam on the San Joaquin River — the first such major project in more than six decades.

But environmentalists and others say the campaign this year for \$1.2 billion to build the dam is not working because the San Joaquin Valley hasn't waited long enough.

Important details on a new reservoir are not yet available, they say, such as the exact location, the true cost, who pays and who would benefit. Since 2003, the federal government has been working on a \$16 million study that will fill in many of the blanks.

But such studies take years for a reservoir that would be more than twice the size of Millerton Lake. The study won't be finished until 2009.

That's the time to have the financing conversation, said Barry Nelson, senior analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council, or NRDC, an environmental watchdog.

"It's simply not credible to talk about it yet," he said. "You can't just ask the public to hand over money without knowing more."

Many city leaders, such as Fresno Mayor Alan Autry, think the time is right. They say a larger reservoir would protect people from floods, especially in a wet year like this one, and provide more water for growing cities, farming and restoring the San Joaquin River.

Similar sentiments come from the Friant Water Users Authority, representing thousands of farmers who use the river for irrigation water.

Friant and NRDC have been facing off in court over river restoration since the 1980s. They are expected in the next month or so to settle an 18-year-old lawsuit over restoration, and a plan to restore dried portions of the river probably will emerge.

NRDC has opposed construction of a new dam, saying there already is enough water if it is managed differently. But Friant officials have long considered a new dam the key solution. The extra water in storage could be released to keep the river flowing, they have said.

Friant supports Senate Bill 902 by state Sen. Jeff Denham, R-Merced, which would put state bond funding on the November ballot for the new dam and river restoration.

It would provide \$500 million for a new dam as well as \$125 million for studies related to the project. It would also provide \$600million for the restoration of the river.

Mario Santoyo, assistant general manager of Friant, said a larger reservoir could have a wider appeal.

"A new reservoir helps statewide," Santoyo said. "We're exploring the idea that it might be able to provide some water for the Metropolitan Water District [of Southern California]. If they become interested in this project, they come to the table with dollars."

But one Metropolitan Water District official, who supports construction of new dams, called the discussion premature. Tim Quinn, deputy general manager of the district, which serves 18 million Southern Californians, said the federal study needs to be finished.

"There has to be an environmental net plus from this project," he said. "There has to be a finance plan. You have to justify the project."

Mayor Autry, in the text of his State of the City speech last week, made it clear the region can wait no longer. In dry years, there are water shortages. In wet years, such as this one, some communities are threatened by flooding.

"About every 10 days this spring, enough water has been released down the river to meet Fresno's needs for a year. ... What we need — what the entire Valley must have — is surface water storage at Temperance Flat."

Temperance Flat is one of the three locations that have been identified as a possible site for a new reservoir east of Fresno, said U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials, who are in charge of the federal study.

The study is the latest among similar investigations dating back to 1952. The investigations focused on raising Friant Dam, and cost has been a main concern.

Of the two other options in the current investigation, one is the raising of Friant Dam, and the other is a new dam at Fine Gold Creek, a tributary near Millerton Lake. The price range among the options is pegged between \$220 million and \$1 billion.

The bureau's latest report said the estimate does not include several other costs, including the price of compensating Pacific Gas & Electric Co. for the loss of a hydroelectric plant at Kerckhoff Reservoir, which might be inundated by a new reservoir.

That cost might run into the hundreds of millions of dollars or more, said lawyer Lloyd Carter, a director of the conservation group Revive the San Joaquin.

The federal study says one of the two Temperance Flat options would wipe out more than 21 megawatts of hydroelectric production. That's enough electricity to light 21,000 homes.

Carter asks how much it would cost to replace the electricity. He said he thinks such costs will be added on top of the price increases that are likely to accompany a dam-building project.

"Let's just say the dam will be built," Carter said. "If you started the process right now, it could take 10 years, and the cost estimates would go up 10% a year. I think we're talking about a price more than \$2 billion, closer to \$3 billion. But everybody quotes this \$1 billion price."

At Temperance Flat, the two possible options would be in the river gorge above Millerton Lake, which holds 520,000 acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is 326,000 gallons of water, or a one-year supply for an average Valley family.

If a new reservoir is built, Millerton would not be eliminated, said Patricia Roberson, project manager. Both Millerton and a new reservoir would be used to store water for summertime use and prevent floods during wet years.

The larger of the two Temperance Flat sites would hold 1.3 million acre-feet of water.

Officials must estimate an average amount of water that can be captured at a new reservoir because the amount of rain and snow vary so much each year.

The bureau reports the bigger Temperance Flat option could provide 165,000 to 183,000 acre-feet of extra water per year.

Said Roberson, "You get a lot of water in snow runoff in some years, but very little in others." #

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