Re: Resolution Opposing the Proposed Raise of Shasta Dam

Dear Tribal Council Representatives,

I'm the Traditional Chief and Spiritual Leader of the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, the Indigenous stewards and caretakers of the Winnemem Waywaket (now known as the McCloud River) since time immemorial. I'm writing to respectfully ask you to consider passing a tribal resolution condemning the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's plan to raise Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet. The project would inundate or damage at least 40 Winnemem Wintu sacred sites and also threatens to contaminate the Shasta reservoir and the flows of the Sacramento River. A template resolution is attached to this message.

HISTORY

When the dam was originally constructed during World War II, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) removed Winnemem Wintu people from the Winnemem Waywaket while the resulting Shasta reservoir flooded nearly 27 miles of our ancestral watershed and homes. The Indian Service (now known as the BIA) and BOR collaborated to dispossess Winnemem Wintu people of thousands of acres of allotment lands along the river with little or no compensation, rendering many of us homeless.

Through the passage of the 1941 Central Valley Indian Lands Acquisition Act, Congress promised us compensation for our flooded lands, including like lands to live on, a cemetery outside the inundation zone, and support of our infrastructure. This Act was essential to allow the filling of the Shasta reservoir yet it is not mentioned in current federal water planning documents. However, the Indian agent who was tasked with fulfilling our compensation ultimately concluded we would be simply "better off leaving the area entirely." We have essentially been recovering from the ensuing diaspora ever since, and the BOR and BIA have never fulfilled their legal obligations of the 1941 Act.

A VIOLATION OF STATE LAW AND DANGEROUS PRECEDENT FOR TRIBES

The BOR is now pushing forward with the proposed 18.5-foot raise of the Shasta Dam, even though it would violate the California Wild and Scenic River Act, which protects the free-flowing nature of many of the state’s rivers including the Winnemem Waywacket (McCloud River). It will also violate the Endangered Species Act including the salamander, yellow legged frog, snow plant, fishers, and the pileated woodpecker to name a few. If completed, this project would set a dangerous precedent to allow federal agencies to flout state laws that protect tribal cultural resources when authorizing destructive projects.

"If the Sacred Fires are not lit, how will our children learn?"

Honor Your Traditional Lifeways
Furthermore, the $1.3 billion dam raise project is an incredible waste of taxpayer money as it's estimated the raise will only yield about 50,000 additional acre-feet every year, less than 1/10th of 1 percent of California’s water budget. Groundwater recharge, ecological restoration, conservation measures and many other types of projects would be far more fruitful and cost-efficient in supporting California’s freshwater supply. The additional water from a raised dam would most likely increase water exports to Westlands Water District’s farms in the San Joaquin Valley. The land in this region is unsuitable for massive irrigation, and this has led to the contamination of thousands of acres of farmland with toxic levels of selenium.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also concluded the proposed raise would inundate uncapped mines in the region, increasing the load of cadmium, mercury and other toxins in the already “mercury-impaired” Shasta reservoir, which would then be flushed down the Sacramento River. The toxic pipeline of this project has the potential to environmentally damage the ancestral watersheds and homelands of many tribes down river from the dam.

UNDERMINING TRIBAL CONSULTATION

The Bureau of Reclamation has tried to undermine the consulting process by getting approval for the raise from numerous tribes downstream whose ancestral territories will be minimally affected or unaffected. This can give the appearance that the “majority” of tribes are either ambivalent about or support the project.

However, the current plan for the dam raise primarily impacts the Winnemem Wintu homelands, and the Winnemem Wintu people and lifeways will suffer the most damaging effects. The dam raise would submerge Balas Son (Puberty Rock) and other sacred sites integral to Balas Chonas Winyupus (Coming of Age Ceremony for young women), which is an important spiritual practice for weaving together our community as well as empowering and strengthening young women. The dam raise would also submerge gathering areas, village sites, burials as well as habitat essential to our salmon restoration efforts.

Can you imagine if a federal agency wanted to destroy one of your village sites and justified it by engaging faraway tribes through a broad “consulting” process to garner the approval of a “majority” of tribes? This is an extremely dangerous precedent for all of our sovereign nations.

Another practice that should be concerning is the BOR’s circumvention of the required section 106 consulting process by pushing a programmatic agreement (PA). These PAs are typically only used when agencies are evaluating broad programs that include many different projects. They are not appropriate to use for a single project like the dam raise and would essentially allow the BOR to ignore the Winnemem Wintu Tribe until construction has already been funded and initiated.

STOPPING GENOCIDAL PATTERNS

But most importantly at a time when the state’s Governor Newsom has finally acknowledged the genocide our peoples survived, I believe it's important we stand together. We must finally end projects and policies that lead to the erasure of our cultures and our relationships to our homelands. An apology doesn’t mean the genocide has officially ended,
and it won’t end as long as government agencies continue to enact genocidal policies.

For Winnemem Wintu people, there is nowhere else we can be Winnemem Wintu except within our ancestral watershed — it’s where we gather, sing, dance, celebrate and connect with the ancestors. All of our tribes have lost so much for the benefit of the state of California, and we can’t afford to lose any more. I respectfully request that you pass a Tribal resolution protecting Winnemem Wintu sacred sites, our lifeways and our sovereignty and our rights to a future.

Under One Sky,

Caleen Sisk
Caleen Sisk,
Traditional Chief and Spiritual Leader
Winnemem Wintu Tribe