

HETCH HETCHY RESERVOIR

To drain or not to drain

Next months key in debate on state's epic environmental issue

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The debate over the proposal to breach the Sierra's O'Shaughnessy Dam, drain the reservoir behind it and restore Hetch Hetchy Valley to its former natural splendor is apt to intensify this summer with the release of a California Department of Water Resources study on the issue.

But preliminary comments from the agency indicate two things:

First, the restoration is technically possible without disrupting water supplies to San Francisco, Modesto and Turlock, the cities that are the beneficiaries of Hetch Hetchy water.

Second, it will cost a lot of money: From \$4 billion to \$8 billion, depending on whom you talk to.

"Regardless of what you do in terms of restoration, it will be expensive," said Gary Bardini, the Hetch Hetchy project manager for the Department of Water Resources.

"People who want to restore the valley tend to pick the low end, and those against it favor the high end," said Larry Weis, the general manager of the Turlock Irrigation District. "So it might be wise to pick a figure in the middle."

For the Hetch Hetchy restoration true believers, Bardini said, "money isn't the issue, of course. The prospect of restoring the valley is what matters. But then there are going to be other people who say, 'Why make this investment when we already have a perfectly good (water delivery) infrastructure?' So it's hard to say how it will play out."

John Muir, the West's seminal conservationist, was a die-hard Hetch Hetchy fan. He compared the valley in sweep and majesty to nearby Yosemite Valley, and fought plans to dam it to provide water for San Francisco.

But O'Shaughnessy Dam went up in 1923, the valley was submerged beneath the reservoir, and San Francisco's water supply was secured. Despite the passage of time, Sierra activists have never been reconciled to the loss of Hetch Hetchy and continue to dream of its restoration.

Their cause gained some political credibility when Donald Hodel, the U.S. interior secretary during President Ronald Reagan's second term, suggested it might be feasible to drain the reservoir and resurrect the valley.

Momentum for the idea gained with studies by UC Davis and the group Environmental Defense concluding that the project could be accomplished without threatening water deliveries to the reservoir's stakeholders.

Finally, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger weighed in, ordering the Department of Water Resources to look at the proposal and report on possible scenarios for recovering the valley. The release of the report is expected in July; public workshops on the study will follow.

Restoration advocates say Hetch Hetchy Reservoir is not essential to the north state's water supply system.

"The bottom line is that it's only marginally important," said Spreck Rosekrans, a hydrology analyst for Environmental Defense and one of the authors of the group's study on Hetch Hetchy.

"San Francisco's eight other surface reservoirs can supply 95 percent of the city's water," Rosekrans said. "True, there are important hydropower and water quality issues that must be considered, but they can be adequately addressed.

"This is an unparalleled opportunity for San Francisco and California to restore a fantastic piece of nature most people thought lost forever."

Under the Environmental Defense plan, San Francisco, Modesto and Turlock would continue to get their water from the Tuolumne River, but Don Pedro Reservoir on the lower river would become the main "bathtub" for holding water during dry periods. New pipelines would be required to tie Don Pedro to San Francisco's delivery system.

San Francisco could continue to take much of its water at an existing diversion dam downstream from Hetch Hetchy. **Additionally, San Francisco could expand Calaveras Reservoir on Alameda Creek, and possibly take water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.**

But the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission remains opposed to tearing down the dam. Restoring the valley, said Susan Leal, the commission's general manager, is a laudable idea -- but as currently proposed, it could threaten both the quality and quantity of water delivered to the city.

While San Francisco owns the Hetch Hetchy system, it would not own Don Pedro, which is controlled by Modesto and Turlock.

"We would merely have guarantees that water would be delivered," Leal said. "That's not the same thing."

San Francisco would also lose clean hydropower generated at the dam, Leal said. Hetch Hetchy supplies about 20 percent of the city's electrical energy, as well as providing some municipal revenues. Making up that power would require burning fossil fuels, she said.

"Also, our water is now gravity-fed from Hetch Hetchy," Leal said. "If we take out O'Shaughnessy Dam, we'll have to pump that water, and that will require the further use of fossil fuels."

Finally, Leal said, expansion of Calaveras Reservoir could impede salmon and steelhead restoration efforts on Alameda Creek, the second-largest stream emptying into San Francisco Bay.

"There are real environmental costs to draining Hetch Hetchy," Leal said, "and that needs to be acknowledged."

Removing the dam would also reduce the quality of the water delivered to the 2.4 million Bay Area residents served by the SFPUC.

"Right now we have some of the cleanest tap water in the U.S., because it comes from high in the Sierra," Leal said. "We do not need to filter it. If we take water from Don Pedro, the quality will be greatly reduced. And it will be reduced even more if we're required to export from the delta."

Modesto and Turlock differ somewhat in their positions on a Hetch Hetchy restoration.

"If we're not hurt as a district, there's a possibility we could support it," said Allen Short, the general manager of the Modesto Irrigation District.

"That said," Short continued, "it doesn't seem to make a lot sense to tear down reservoirs in a state that faces chronic water shortages, or take out generators producing clean energy in a state short on electrical generating capacity."

Larry Weis of the Turlock Irrigation District seems more bullish on a restoration.

"If we're kept whole, we would support it," Weis said.

Weis said that the soundness of the alternative water storage plans would have to be confirmed.

"As to hydropower, I don't see a major giveaway if the dam is removed," he said. "Eleanor and Cherry reservoirs are also part of that (Hetch Hetchy) system, and they'll keep generating. And you also might be able to divert water downstream from Hetch Hetchy for power production."

On a recent tour of Hetch Hetchy, Assemblywoman Lois Wolk (D-Davis) discussed the water-quality issue.

"The fact is that the Clean Water Act says that as science evolves and tests become more accurate, water standards will increasingly tighten," Wolk said.

"Right now, San Francisco doesn't have to filter Hetch Hetchy water, but that will change," Wolk said. "Sooner or later -- due to tougher regulations and perhaps increased contamination in the Sierra -- the water will not meet federal standards. Then San Francisco will be in the same boat as everyone else. At that point, water quality won't be as compelling an argument against restoration."

Ultimately, the restoration of Hetch Hetchy is based on a transcendent vision, not mere facts. That's what makes the movement so dynamic, and supporters so determined.

Ron Good, the executive director of Restore Hetch Hetchy, an ad hoc group dedicated to draining the reservoir, noted PUC representatives have said Hetch Hetchy Valley is not at all comparable to Yosemite Valley -- that it is smaller, and was carpeted with marshes and fens prior to inundation.

But John Muir, said Good, "called Hetch Hetchy a '... grand landscape garden, one of nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples...' Speaking for myself, I'll take John Muir's description over the PUC's any day."