

Removing dams to save fish

Bill would target obsolete structures

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California could become one of the most aggressive states to embrace a trend considered unimaginable only a decade ago — tearing down dams to save fish — under a bill introduced Thursday in the state Legislature.

The bill, by state Sen. Byron Sher, D-Redwood City, would require the State Resources Agency to draw up a list of dams by Jan. 1, 2002, that could be demolished to help the recovery of endangered salmon and steelhead trout.

"A large number of dams in California have become obsolete," said Sher, a Stanford University Law professor who chairs the Senate Environmental Quality Committee.

"Removing some of them could restore hundreds of miles of spawning habitat for salmon and steelhead."

Sher said he is not advocating ripping apart the giant dams that form

the backbone of California's complicated water and flood-control system. Most would be small dams that are silted up, abandoned or in disrepair, and where there is little or no opposition to removal, he said.

The bill, SB 1540, would prohibit including on the list any dams from the Central Valley Project or the State Water Project. It also would exclude dams "that provide essential flood control, water supply, or hydroelectric benefits," but could recommend structural changes.

California has more than 1,400 dams, ranging from 754-foot-high Oroville Dam in Butte County — the nation's tallest — to tiny structures less than 5 feet high.

The dams are used for flood control, irrigation water, storage of drinking water, recreation, electricity and other purposes. But they also have decimated salmon across the West. Fish cannot return to spawn because rivers are blocked.

Although it offers no money, the



Sher Says hundreds of miles of spawning habitat for salmon and steelhead could be restored.

bill could create a focused list for state and federal officials looking for projects to fund as part of salmon restoration efforts. At least \$85 million is available in state and federal funds for salmon restoration.

Recently, government agencies led by U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, have begun removing some smaller dams to aid fish.

In November, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. announced an agreement with state and federal officials to demolish five of its small dams to restore 42 miles of Battle Creek, a premier habitat for salmon and steelhead in Shasta and Tehama counties. The \$50.7 million project is the largest dam removal effort in California.

Last summer, crews tore down

the 24-foot-high Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River in Maine. Atlantic salmon and shad have returned in record numbers.

"The tradition and history of California is to build dams and harness rivers," said Charles Casey, a spokesman for Friends of the River, a Sacramento environmental group. "This bill could give us the data to make decisions toward restoring the balance."

Casey's group has recommended more than 20 dams for removal. They include dams less than 10 feet high — such as one on Wilder Creek in Santa Cruz County and the Striol and Niles dams on Alameda Creek.

Farmers say they are not entirely opposed.

"Obviously, there would be concerns if it becomes a water supply issue for farmers, but we're willing to look at it on a case-by-case basis," said Dave Kranz, a spokesman for the California Farm Bureau Federation.

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