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‘Voice of the Bear River’ to be shown at Wild & Scenic Film Festival

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Keith Hagen/KHagen@theunion.com |

A bird's eye view of the Bear River, at the Dog Bar Road bridge, in southern Nevada County. Take flight via video over the Bear River at TheUnion.com, thanks to submitted footage by Keith Hagen.

The short film, “Voice of the Bear River,” opens with sweeping aerial views of snow-covered landscapes.

In the film a woman’s voice personifies the river on which the Nevada Irrigation District has proposed building the Centennial Dam. The project, which will cost hundreds of millions of dollars, has created strong opposition, with detractors claiming it would lead to eminent domain, the loss of recreation areas and an outdated method of water storage.

“I am the tender snowflakes that blink at the Sierra Nevada,” the film begins. “I flow through the meadows and carve my own path. I gush down steep slopes building icy cascades with my water. I am mighty. I am alive. I am the Bear River and the

proposal to build the Centennial Dam puts me at your mercy.”

The film, scheduled for a 12:30 p.m. Saturday block at the Wild & Scenic Film Festival, is the creation of John Marlow. The filmmaker said the impacts the dam would create — the loss of homes and ceremonial Native American sites, among others, led him to make the 20-minute film.

“The ceremonial sites still in use by the Nisenan people would be taken and flooded,” Marlow said in an email. “Homes that have warmed the hearts of 3 generations would be destroyed. Recreation ruined. Money from tourism would be spent someplace else.”

Marlow said he reached out to NID multiple times for comment on the project, saying he spoke with both an employee and board member Nancy Weber.

No NID representative is featured in the film.

Weber said she saw the film about three weeks ago.

"I think he did a good job," Weber said. "There are some inaccuracies in it. A very heartfelt job."

Weber, however, said she'll take no position on the project until all the studies are complete.

A draft environmental impact report, a large study required for the dam, is expected this autumn.

Remleh Scherzinger, general manager of NID, said he didn't speak to Marlow. He dismissed the film, calling it inaccurate, though he said he has not seen it.

"There aren't Native American burial grounds out there," Scherzinger said. "There are no tourist attractions down there. There are no farms."

Marlow emphasized his appreciation and respect of NID, though he urged the agency to stop the project. He wants his film to sway NID's board against Centennial Dam and vote to stop the project.

"We need them to know there is honor in turning around now," he states. "Sometimes the best course of action is taking a 180-degree turn before it's too late. An error doesn't become a mistake until you refuse to correct it."

The river's persona in Marlow's film echoes that message in its last moments. The voice of the Bear River again speaks to viewers, invoking a call to action.

"I am the Bear River and I am proud of this community every time you keep a place wild and protected," the voice states. "It's time to come together and stand up for the ideals you hold most dear. Don't underestimate yourself and don't overestimate the opposition. Now is the time for each of you to do whatever it takes to convince NID that Centennial Dam must be stopped and the rivers must be protected."

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