

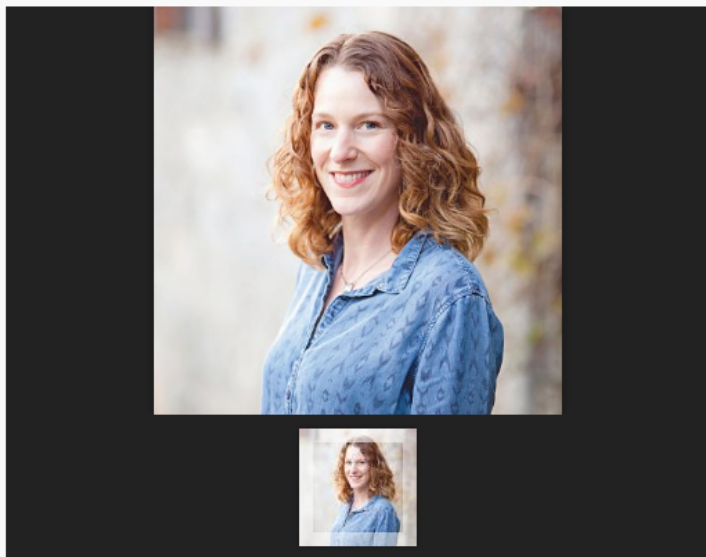
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Another View

Concerns fester surrounding Centennial Dam

By: Melinda Booth



It has been four years since Nevada Irrigation District Board (NID) passed closed-session Resolution 2014-43, authorizing a water rights application for a “water storage project on the Bear River” without any public comment or board discussion. This was the beginning of Centennial Dam. Since then, (South Yuba River Citizens League) SYRCL and others have tried to bring Centennial Dam into public purview to promote transparency and open dialogue.

The most recent attempt was at NID’s Special Board Meeting on Oct. 9.

NID Board asked SYRCL to justify their request that work on the Centennial Dam project stop while NID studies the community’s future water supply needs through the Raw Water Master Plan (RWMP). NID Board rejected SYRCL’s request, and the opportunity to finally discuss these issues in a public forum.

SYRCL has numerous concerns about Centennial Dam.

It would demolish the last six miles of free-flowing river, destroy 2,200 acres of oak woodland habitat, impact threatened species, and drown Native American cultural sites that are still used today. The dam would also swallow more than two dozen homes.

Centennial Dam would not provide secure water storage for our community.

California’s Fourth Climate Change Assessment warns of increased flood risk due to aging infrastructure, negative impacts on water quality — like mercury, longer droughts, larger storms, and more severe wildfires that increase erosion

and sedimentation. A dam is an inflexible solution in a future of climate uncertainty where adaptability is our best hope.

We are concerned about the increasing cost of Centennial Dam. The California Water Commission estimated its cost at \$491 million, an independent economist estimated more than \$1 billion with financing. The final cost is unknown, but it is a large number that is only increasing and there is no known funding plan.

Worst of all, the cost of Centennial Dam will likely land on our community’s shoulders as there is no apparent way to finance the debts from this project without selling water to customers outside our community. SYRCL values our rural lifestyle and local agriculture for food, open space, and wildlife habitat. Farmers provide valuable ecosystem services on their land and we want to help keep our water local and affordable. We are therefore concerned that our community won’t be able to pay when the bill for Centennial Dam comes due.

We were hoping NID would address these concerns on Oct. 9, but instead they made some troubling claims:

- NID claimed fiscal responsibility pursuant to required laws and regulations. However, they missed SYRCL's point. As NID's legal counsel stated, Centennial is still a proposed project, and unlikely to move forward. Spending \$14 million of tax and rate payer funds on a project that is not approved or justified is not fiscally responsible.
- NID stated that they had to demolish structures on two properties purchased for Centennial, but never explained why those properties were purchased in the first place. Purchasing and then demolishing structures with no approved project tears a community apart, which is the heart of SYRCL's concern.
- NID is concerned its water rights application will be canceled if it stops work on Centennial Dam to update the RWMP. "Diligent" pursuit of the application must be shown to the State Water Resources Control Board, and SYRCL believes the RWMP itself constitutes diligence, thus no additional spending on Centennial Dam is required. Also, the Water Board

understands the extended process of water rights applications, allowing other applications to sit for years.

Rather than encouraging any discussion, NID cut off public comment. They instead passed a new resolution that placed an annual \$2 million "cap" on Centennial work, calling this a compromise. This is hardly a compromise since NID's budget already allocates up to \$2 million/year through 2023.

SYRCL has been prepared to engage in the RWMP process since April, but the experience and revelations of Oct. 9 make it difficult to believe external participation will be genuinely welcomed and incorporated. However, SYRCL still believes NID can meet the water needs of our community's homes, farms, ranches, businesses, and the environment through increased efficiency, conservation, and alternative water supply and storage strategies.

A secure water future does not require a financially risky, environmentally and culturally destructive new dam. We must face these issues head on in a public forum through rational and inclusive dialogue. NID must lead the community in a comprehensive and sincere discussion in order for the RWMP to succeed in outlining a sustainable water future for all.

Melinda Booth is the executive director of South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL).