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Lake Perris's recreational future on shaky footing

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SACRAMENTO - On warm weekends, Lake Perris State Recreation Area is filled with people swimming, boating, fishing and otherwise enjoying themselves.

Yet the fun in the sun at the Riverside County lake underlies a years-long dispute over allotting money to pay for recreation along the state's water-supply backbone.

Lake Perris is the poster child for the multi-layered disagreement involving the state Department of Water Resources, the Legislature's nonpartisan fiscal analyst and water project contractors such as the Metropolitan Water District, which supplies water to much of the Inland area.

How the dispute plays out could determine how -- and whether -- the cash-strapped state completes a costly project to strengthen the seismically weakened two-mile-long dam at Lake Perris.

The outcome could mean that the days of swimming and boating at the lake, which draws some 1.5 million visitors a year, are numbered.

"We know it's a very important resource to that part of the state," said Mark Andersen, chief of water project management at the Department of Water Resources. At some point, though, the state either has to finish the dam-strengthening project or drain the lake, he said.

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Ed Crisostomo / The Press-Enterprise
People enjoy a day of boating on Lake Perris earlier this month. Swimming and boating draw 1.5 million visitors a year to the Inland recreation area, which needs major work to make it earthquake safe.

The water resources department contends that the Legislature, encouraged by the legislative analyst's office, is starving it of money to pay recreation's share of expensive construction at Lake Perris and other parts of the 50-year-old State Water Project.

But in a report earlier this year, the legislative analyst's office concluded that the water resources department was overstating the recreational benefit of water-project construction.

Water contractors that pay for the system's upkeep, meanwhile, contend that they're contributing far too much to projects that benefit swimmers and boaters more than their customers.

"We don't think the state is doing what it should be doing to step up to its obligation," said Jeffrey Kightlinger, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District.

Tail end

Lake Perris is at the southernmost end of the State Water Project. Approved by voters in 1960, the project is California's main means to move water from Northern California to parts of the San Francisco Bay Area, the Central Valley and heavily populated Southern California.

Today, the system supplies two-thirds of Californians with water. Fees from water-project customers pay for its upkeep and operational costs.

A 1961 law said decision-makers also should take into account recreation and fish-and-wildlife habitat when planning water-project construction.

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That law, the Davis-Dolwig Act, said a share of the expense should be allotted to the recreational benefit. Water contractors wouldn't pay for that. Instead, the law declared that it was the intent of the Legislature that state taxpayers would cover the cost, which has totaled almost a half-billion dollars since 1961.

In March, though, the analyst's office reported that the Department of Water Resources had run up $155 million in unpaid recreation benefit charges through 2006-07. Water contractors fronted that money and have not been paid back.

In addition, the analyst office's report concluded that the department was overstating recreation's share of State Water Project costs. Little of that money actually pays for new recreational amenities, such as picnic tables, boat ramps and the like, the report said.

In the case of Lake Perris, the water resources department has estimated the recreational benefit to be 7 percent. The dam project has a 2008 cost estimate of $360 million, meaning recreation's share would be about $25.2 million.

That is almost twice as much as last month's $14 million budget cut in parks funding, which has parks officials

planning to close about 100 parks.

"The DWR is continuing to incur new recreation costs at SWP facilities without identifying a state funding source to pay for them or considering legislative priorities for spending or recreation programs," the office wrote.

Water department officials criticize the report. They said the department has used the Davis-Dolwig law fairly.

"We haven't fronted any contractor money. We haven't incurred any debt to contractors," Andersen said. "There is no debt that DWR is illegally assigning to the general fund."

The state has to account for the recreational benefit of Lake Perris, Andersen added.

"If the LAO had its way, the capital fix at Perris would have no recreation component and yet 1.5 million people are still visiting there," he said.

Lake's fate

For years, Lake Perris was about 110 feet deep and held 42 billion gallons of water.

But in 2005, engineers at the California Department of Water Resources discovered that Lake Perris's earthen dam could collapse during an earthquake in the magnitude-7.5 range.

In a worst-case scenario, a break would unleash 26 billion gallons of water across 30,000 acres of western Riverside County, from rural Lakeview to the Prado Dam near Corona.

As a temporary fix, officials lowered the lake 25 feet, reducing the lake's volume by about 40 percent. That has reduced the number of boats allowed on the lake, from 450 to 250 at a time.

Under the department's proposal, the Perris dam's weakened foundation would be fortified and strengthened by a new berm. Workers also would add an emergency channel to divert flood waters. The first phase of the dam project is scheduled to begin in January 2011.

But water contractors have raised concerns about the project's huge cost. A contractor-commissioned study estimated that the project's recreational benefit was 50 to 75 percent -- far above the water resources department's 7 percent estimate.

Water suppliers like MWD have weighed finding other sources. Building a new facility to store the same amount of water as Lake Perris would cost only $65 million, according to one contractor's estimate quoted in the legislative analyst's report, and without the human activity that makes Lake Perris water more difficult to treat.

Kightlinger said a final decision has not been made. "It's a thorny issue for all," he said.

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DAVIS-DOLWIG ACT

The 1961 law declared that it is the intent of the Legislature that State Water Project facilities be built "in a manner consistent with the full utilization of their potential for the enhancement of fish and wildlife and to meet recreational needs."