

Leading water conservation group IDs top five obsolete dams to remove in California

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Fish and watershed conservation non-profit organization California Trout (CalTrout) released a new report today detailing the top five dams ripe for removal in the Golden State. The lower four Klamath Dams are on the list. Removal of the dams named in the Top 5 California DAMS OUT Report would support the recovery of California's native migratory salmon and steelhead populations, many of which are at critical risk of extinction; improve the health of watersheds, which benefits both people and wildlife; and provide economic, recreational and safety benefits to local communities. The dams identified in the report were carefully selected: dams that provide the least benefit for people and cause the greatest harms to imperiled native fish rose to the top.

"Removing the lower four Klamath Dams is a big and important step toward restoring the health of the entire Klamath River watershed, benefitting native fish and local economies," explained Curtis Knight, Executive Director of CalTrout. "This removal project, which will be the largest dam removal in US history, is also a social justice issue. Salmon are central to the cultures and livelihoods of Klamath Basin Tribes."

More than 1,400 dams block California rivers, creeks and streams. Many of these structures block access to salmon and steelhead spawning and rearing habitat. Studies have shown access to upstream habitat is critical for promoting self-sustaining populations of migratory fish. While a great number of the state's dams provide critical water supply, flood control and hydroelectric power, many others have outlived their functional lifespan and could be removed without impacting human health and safety.

"Klamath Basin fish populations are hanging on by a thread. Removing these dams would go a long way toward ensuring resilient populations of salmon and steelhead native to the Klamath River system," continued Knight.

Many dams create public safety concerns, lower water quality, and degrade watersheds, which hold cultural and economic importance for many Californians. Among other harms, dams block sediment from flowing downstream to the ocean. Sediment is critically important to support beaches and reduce coastal erosion. To learn more about the history of dams and dam removal in the U.S. and gain a deeper understanding of how CalTrout picked these top dams, see this StoryMap.

CalTrout's 2022 Top Five California DAMS OUT

- Klamath Dams (Iron Gate Dam, Copco Dam #1, Copco Dam #2), Klamath River (Siskiyou County)

Four aging hydroelectric dams, three of which are in California, block salmon and steelhead from reaching more than 300 miles of spawning and rearing habitat. Dam removal is expected to move forward in the coming years.

- Matilija Dam, Matilija Creek, tributary to Ventura River, near Ojai (Ventura County)

Built in 1947 for water storage and flood control, Matilija Dam is now physically deteriorating and essentially non-functional due to excessive sedimentation. There is widespread support for removal among locals and public agencies.

- Scott Dam, Eel River, in Potter Valley (Lake County)

One of two dams in PG&E's Potter Valley Project, which provides hydroelectricity, water storage and diversions into the Russian River. Scott Dam blocks 150 miles of salmon and steelhead rearing habitat. The future of the Potter Valley Project facilities is currently unknown, as PG&E has opted against pursuing a new license.

- Rindge Dam, Malibu Creek, in Malibu (Los Angeles County)

Located in Malibu Creek State Park about three miles upstream from the coastline, Rindge Dam was completed in 1926 to provide water for irrigation and household use. The reservoir filled entirely with sediment by the 1940s. Removal would provide access to high-quality steelhead habitat and allow much-needed sediment to reach the ocean and reduce coastal erosion.

- Battle Creek Dams, North Fork and South Fork Battle Creek, tributary to Sacramento River, near Red Bluff (Tehama County)

This complex of 8 dams virtually eliminated access to 42 miles of migratory fish habitat as well as connectivity for resident fish populations. Removal of several dams is already underway. Currently owned by PG&E, the remaining dams will likely be decommissioned.

CalTrout identified these dams as priorities for removal by reviewing a collection of scientific studies with the goal of assessing the overall benefits that removal would present to native fish and people.