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U.S.

Interior Secretary Meets With Group Seeking to Drain San Francisco Reservoir

City has long resisted proposals to drain Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and store its water supply elsewhere



Water being released from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park in May 2012. PHOTO: JOHN HOLLAND/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Jim Carlton

July 22, 2018 3:00 p.m. ET

SAN FRANCISCO—Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is interested in restoring the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park to its natural state after more than 100 years of providing water to the people of San Francisco and some suburbs.

During a visit Sunday to Yosemite, Mr. Zinke planned to meet with a group called Restore Hetch

Hetchy, formed about two decades ago to pursue a goal of draining the reservoir.

“This is still just a fact-finding meeting, but the secretary is very interested in restoring the valley to its natural state,” said an Interior official. The official said Mr. Zinke wants to learn how removing the dam at Hetch Hetchy would “contribute to the reliable operation” of an existing federal water project that supplies water to California farmers, “in addition to the conservation benefits removal would provide.”

The damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley by San Francisco a century ago—burying a valley comparable in splendor to the famed Yosemite Valley—has long been regarded as one of the West’s great environmental catastrophes. Restore Hetch Hetchy’s plan is to drain the 360,000-acre-foot reservoir and make San Francisco store its mountain water somewhere else, perhaps even underground. An acre foot is about the amount of water a family of five uses in one year.

The group had also tried to get support from Washington, asking every Interior secretary since 2000 to meet on the issue, said Spreck Rosekrans, executive director. “San Francisco has monopolized this spectacular valley for 100 years, and it’s time to return it to the American people,” Mr. Rosekrans said.

The Reagan administration had broached the idea in 1987. The administration of President George W. Bush was contemplating a feasibility study for it, but powerful San Francisco interests including Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein have helped blocked any action.

The group hasn’t had luck in the courts either. Restore Hetch Hetchy lost a lawsuit first filed in 2015 to have the dam declared an unlawful diversion, and the case is now being appealed to the California Supreme Court.

While San Francisco officials weren’t immediately available for comment, they have steadfastly opposed the proposal in the past. City residents in 2012 voted down a measure to study the idea, with 77% voting against it. Draining is also widely opposed in the surrounding Bay Area, in part because recent droughts have raised concern over water supplies and because the quality of San Francisco’s supply—piped directly from the Sierra Nevada mountains—is considered one of the highest among Western cities.

Dismantling would “cause enormous environmental damage and put at grave risk the reliable water and clean energy supply for more than 2.5 million residents and businesses,” the Bay

Area Council business group warned in a statement after the Hetch Hetchy suit was first filed in 2015.

Getting a meeting with Mr. Zinke, whose office said he first received a request last year, is a victory for the group.

“He is interested to learn how removing the dam would contribute to the reliable operation” of the federal Central Valley Project water system, the Interior official said, as well as the conservation benefits.

Mr. Rosekrans said it would take about two years to drain the granite-walled valley and five years for enough grass and wildlife to return to attract visitors. San Francisco’s water, he added, could be stored elsewhere downstream of the Tuolumne River such as by enlarging other reservoirs or banking underground. He said he hopes Mr. Zinke uses his influence to push the draining idea forward.

“I think anybody should be inspired by restoring Hetch Hetchy to the American people,” he said.

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