



Winnemem Wintus sue federal agencies over Shasta Dam, other issues

By Dylan Darling
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SACRAMENTO - Following a night-long war dance, members of a north state American Indian tribe Monday marched from a camp on the American River to the Capitol to announce a lawsuit against six federal agencies.

The lawsuit claims that the agencies, as well as two top officials, have caused destruction or damage to cultural sites in Shasta County.

The lawsuit - filed electronically late Sunday night by the Winnemem Wintu in the Eastern District Court of California in Sacramento - details village sites, ceremonial rocks and other sacred places that have been damaged or are threatened, according to the tribe.

"We hope this lawsuit and war dance will protect our basic quality of life and ensure our freedom to maintain our traditions and culture," Caleen Sisk-Franco, the tribe's spiritual leader, said in a statement released Monday.

In particular the tribe, which is not federally recognized, is worried about the Bureau of Reclamation's study of potentially raising Shasta Dam. Doing so could flood 20 sacred sites along the McCloud River arm of Lake Shasta, tribe leaders have said.

The tribe says the lawsuit is an attempt to stop further damage and also to win compensation from the government for past damage. No amount was specified.

"It would be premature to put a number on it," said Jayne Fleming, an attorney with Reed Smith in Oakland, which is providing free legal service for the tribe.

On Sunday, members of the tribe held a "war dance" ceremony at Camp Pollock, a Boy Scout camp along the American River. The dance, which included fasting and prayer, was the continuation of a similar dance held at Shasta Dam in 2004.

On Monday morning, the group walked about a mile from the camp to the Capitol, where they held a press conference about the lawsuit.

The suit was filed against the Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack.

Fleming said one of the possible remedies for the agencies is to restore the tribe to federal recognition. She said the tribe lost its status when they were left out of the federal registry in the 1980s.

"The end goal is to make sure the tribe has a voice," Fleming said.

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