

# Applegate Dam

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

With the recent removal of some of our local dams and others being considered for removal, it brings back memories about the pros and cons of the Applegate Dam. For years many old timers living near the Applegate River wished there was a dam to ease the flooding of their lands. Still others strongly objected to where such a dam would be built and how it would change the river. Here are some interesting facts from my scrapbook.

As early as 1962, opposition to the possibility of a dam on the river was being heard at local gatherings. Some of the older land owners were worried that they would lose their free water rights for irrigating their fields. Others were actually worried about losing their lands. A petition against the dam was circulated that stated:

- With irrigation the only source of payment, the project is not fair and equitable to water users.
- The farm production of the United States does not require 5,000 new acres in the Applegate Valley ( I assume this means acreage no longer subject to flooding).
- The loss of at least seven miles of fish spawning beds above the dam will do more destruction than will be gained by the plans for fish enhancement. The quick benefits, such as employment, merchandise sales, land sales, rentals for workers, are not good long range economics for the Applegate Valley.
- The dam will spoil the Applegate as a family recreation stream.
- The deep reservoir would be dangerous for small children, access would be limited and difficult, and many camps would be flooded out and could not be replaced because of the steep terrain.
- The reservoir would be subject to severe fluctuations, up to draw downs of 122 feet.

And then there was the cost; in 1974 the Corps of Engineers presented an estimate of \$50.2 million to build the dam, by the next year the estimate was up to \$63 million. In 1976 a "Save the Applegate" group had been organized that wished to create an alternative program for flood control. It included an intensive reforestation program of the whole Applegate watershed, revised forestry road building practices, river channel cleaning, and purchase of necessary lower Applegate flood plain lands. The plan would reduce heavy rain runoff, riverbank overflow, maintain present irrigation rights and provide increased recreational access to the river. The association was seeking to halt further funding of the Applegate Dam, for which land was being purchased by the Corps. President Ford's Budget already included \$ 3 million for the project. (MMT March 2, 1976)

Jackson County Commissioners had been contacted about having a vote on the Dam proposal during November general elections. Even though Jackson County would be left with all of the continued cost after the dam was in (i.e. road maintenance), Josephine County Commissioners were also contacted because a substantial portion of flood control benefits would occur in their county. Both counties were opposed to

having a public vote on the proposal. In April 1976, the Save the Applegate Valley Association spent almost a week in Washington D.C. to convince Congress to support the idea of a local opinion vote. The vote never materialized.

By October 1, 1977 the price tag for the Applegate Dam was roughly \$89.4 million. The plans for the dam had been changed several times in the last five years. The plan now called for a 242-foot high, 1,200-foot long rock fill dam located about one half mile downstream from French Gulch. When filled, it would hold 82,000 acre-feet of water, making the lake about five miles long with an 18-mile shoreline.

Long periods of interruptions by governmental and citizens actions finally gave way and the first phase of the dam started in 1977, even though the bulk of the money had not been approved by Congress or President Carter. The Corps went ahead anyway and started acquiring private land in the upper Applegate Valley, getting the approved funds by the groundbreaking date of June 18, 1978.

The ceremony took place near the project site on the Applegate River at milepost 15 on Upper Applegate Road. The Rogue Basin Flood Control and Water Resources Association, the Committee to Revitalize our Applegate River and the Upper Applegate Grange sponsored the groundbreaking event.

The Dam was completed in October 1980 for \$96 million; by March 1981 the reservoir behind the dam was more than half full and ready for a dedication on May 27. There were 350 people at the formal dedication which included Oregon Governor Atiyeh, Oregon Senator Hatfield, and other dignitaries. The sun shone down on the gathering of the man-made lake, an historic event. Was it worth the cost and



completely destroying the little community of Watkins and Copper, now beneath its waters? Only time will really decide that question. Those who had been against the project may now agree that it is at least a beautiful lake when filled and the snow-capped Siskiyou Red Butte mountains behind adds to its luster.

This closing is by Eric W. Allen Jr., editor of the *Medford Mail Tribune* May 27, 1981:

The Applegate Valley, jewel of the Siskiyou,  
Now gains a new gem in a lake  
That will serve the many purposes  
of man...  
And will become a part of the  
history  
Of an area with a rich historic  
background.

*Articles from the Medford Mail Tribune were used for timeline and cost estimates.*

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with Janeen Sathre  
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*Photo above: Applegate Lake. Courtesy of Jan Wilts.*

*Photo below: The Copper Store before the construction of the Applegate Dam.*



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