

Frequent waterfalls provide a scenic backdrop for paddler Albert Romvari on the awe-inspiring Giant Gap section.

**PADDLE THIS WILD
CANYON AND
YOU'LL GIVE A
DAMN!**

NORTH FORK AMERICAN RIVER

IN WAKE OF KATRINA, GOP CONGRESSMEN REVIVE CALL TO RAISE AUBURN DAM FROM THE DEAD

By Geoff Jennings and Pete Gauvin • Photos by Geoff Jennings

The North Fork of the American River is a frothy ribbon of exquisite beauty and intense fun hidden in a deep canyon that is a world away but just minutes from the traffic-mad asphalt of parallel-running Interstate 80.

Each winter and spring kayakers of all abilities flock to the North Fork for some of the state's best kayaking, enjoying the natural flows from rain and snowmelt. In this extraordinarily wet year, with late-season storms depositing great sums of moisture in the Sierra snow bank, paddlers will be able to draw on the North Fork well past its typical June-depletion date.

The put-in for the popular Chamberlain Falls run is only 15 minutes from the highway, nearly a thousand feet down in an undeveloped canyon where paddlers enjoy a remote-feeling 5-mile Class IV run with excellent rapids, great play spots and breathtaking scenery. Downstream is the similarly pretty but easier Shirttail Canyon stretch, 9.5 miles of Class II+ water. Above both, lie the incredible expert-only runs of Giant Gap and Generation Gap, Class IV+ and V.

Once in the canyon, it's easy to forget that these untamed sections of water are just a short distance upstream of Sacramento, our sprawling state capital. Because Sacramento sits just 25 feet above sea level and is at the confluence of three major river systems (the American, Sacramento, and Feather), flooding is a frequent concern. Currently,

Sacramento has the equivalent of "100-year flood protection," the lowest rating of any metropolitan area in the nation.

This spring, following the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina and a parade of drenching Pacific storms, several influential Republican leaders once again pointed their fingers at the untamed North Fork and revived calls for the long-abandoned Auburn Dam.

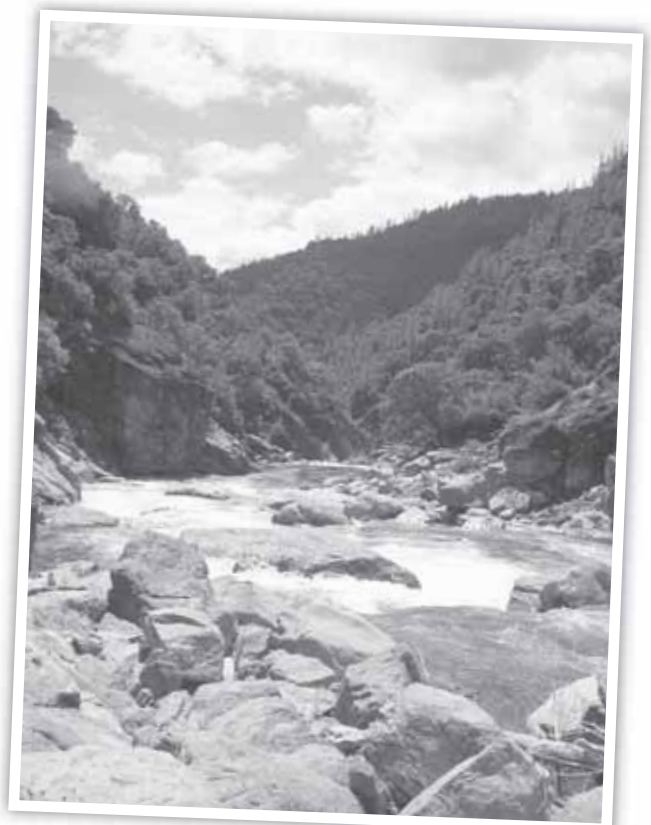
In early April, at a hearing of the House Resources Committee's subcommittee on energy and water in Washington, D.C., key Republican congressmen spoke out in favor of the dam, including committee chairman Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Tracy, and subcommittee chairman Rep. George Radanovich, R-Mariposa.

"I don't think anybody can come to an answer that gives us 500-year flood protection for the city of Sacramento without the Auburn Dam. That's just the cold hard reality that's in front of us right now," said Pombo, whose support of the dam isn't much of a surprise. With his positions in support of privatizing national parks and gutting the Endangered Species Act, Pombo is currently the biggest thorn in the side of conservationists.

How likely is the revival of the Auburn Dam, which has been snuffed out multiple times by Congress due to its vulnerability to an earthquake and stratospheric, ever-rising cost estimates (currently in the ballpark of \$3 billion for a "multi-use" dam)?

The possibility seems remote, given the disfavor that dams from Glen Canyon to the Columbia River have engendered by fowling ecosystems and decimating fisheries, not to mention the price tag of such a grandiose project today. At 800 feet in height and 4,000 feet across at its rim, the Auburn Dam was to have been the largest concrete arched dam in the world when it was originally authorized by Congress in 1965.

With a short side-trip, Highway 80 travelers can view the site of the dam, just below the confluence of the North and Middle forks. Take the Foresthill exit above Auburn and drive south over the Foresthill Bridge. At 730-plus feet, the bridge is the highest in California. It was built to span the reservoir that would have drowned the North and Middle Fork canyons for a combined 50 miles. Still visible is the earth-moving foundation work that was done before the project was halted in 1975 after the discovery of an earthquake fault and the



A wild river is a beautiful thing.

subsequently prohibitive costs of building a seismically-sound structure. (If an Auburn Dam were to fail, engineers predicted it would likely take out Folsom Dam downstream, creating mass devastation.)



Nutracker rapid, class V, on the Giant Gap run at 1300 cfs.

Despite these obstacles, it would be foolish to discount the passions, determination and political power of those who fervently want to see the dam built. If that means leveraging the fears of Sacramento area residents by intimating a Katrina-like scenario, then, as we have seen, dam proponents won't hesitate to make the case.

In September, right on the heels of the Katrina disaster, Rep. John Doolittle, R-Rocklin, who has pursued the Auburn Dam like it was the Holy Grail (Could it be the development dollars it would bring to his district?), penned a column in The Sacramento Bee claiming that "the Auburn dam is the only means of protecting Sacramento from the devastation we have witnessed in New Orleans."

Such an alarming assertion seems a bit disingenuous, particularly when there is already a plan to upgrade Folsom Dam and improve levees downstream that would achieve 200-year flood protection – a plan, in fact, that then-Rep. Bob Matsui, D-Sacramento, brokered with

Doolittle in 2003 in an effort to get him to abandon the Auburn Dam.

Fat chance! In April, Doolittle said he would seek \$5 million to begin work on a feasibility study for the Auburn Dam.

The upgrades to Folsom Dam include raising it seven feet, but more importantly, enlarging the outlet gates so water managers can drop the level of the lake further and more quickly to accommodate excess water in the event of a major storm event sending runoff gushing down from the Sierra. While the costs of this project have tripled to \$650 million, it remains hundreds of times more achievable than the Auburn Dam.

At the House committee hearing in Washington, California Department of Water Resources Director Lester Snow warned that efforts to continue to chase a far-off, controversial and extremely costly Auburn Dam would likely hinder providing adequate flood protection for Sacramento rather than help.

"Our focus right now in the state is that we need to be sure we get these improvements and not get distracted by the next debate over Auburn Dam," Snow said. "The debate in the past has actually delayed investment in flood improvements in the region."

If the Auburn Dam were ever to be built, some of the most spectacular, wild, and accessible kayaking in the area would disappear. A large stretch of the river would no longer be available for hiking, fishing,

camping, or swimming. The ecological damage would be enormous.

At some point, we have to stop pretending that we can prevent every potential act of nature. Taking reasonable steps to prevent loss of life and property, such as upgrading Folsom Dam and repairing Sacramento levees, is prudent, but the cost-benefit ratio of building the Auburn Dam seems insufficient to justify the loss of a natural free-flowing river and the accompanying habitat and recreational opportunities it provides.

In the same vein that it makes no sense to give up our civil liberties to protect us from every conceivable threat of terrorism, nor does it make any sense to ruin another river to guard against a natural disaster that might, **MIGHT** happen once every 500 years.

Let this renewed talk of an Auburn Dam serve as a reminder that those of us who care about rivers and wild places need to remain vigilant and vociferous in Sacramento and Washington. Too many times our tax dollars have gone to destroy our natural resources. To let it happen again would be a shame.

Paddle the beautiful North Fork and you'll begin to understand. **ASJ**

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