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Hansen Dam lakes restoration disputed

By Kerry Cavanaugh

Water regulators ordered the Army Corps of Engineers on Friday to remove all the concrete, rebar and debris it dumped in the Hansen Dam lakes last year and to repair environmental damage in a 201-acre area.

Corps officials said they have no qualms about cleaning up the debris in four months as required.

But they balked at the massive restoration requirement that could cost the federal government millions of dollars -- a cost that corps officials said the city of Los Angeles might be asked to help cover.

"We have to seek money from somebody," said Lt. Col. David Turk. "It's a possibility that the city may have to pay something."

Hansen Dam is federal land with recreational areas leased to the city. The two entities have a cost-sharing agreement. Recreation and Parks officials said Friday that the cost-sharing agreement would not cover the cleanup because the dumping was done without city permission and is the corps' responsibility.

Turk said Friday that he was trying to check the agreement to see whether it would indeed cover the costs.

Whatever the expense, the Army Corps of Engineers would remove the debris in the lakes, the corps spokesman said.

However, regulators and the corps are still at odds over how much debris was actually dumped into the two lower lakes and the extent of the natural area damaged.

The Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board wants the corps to plant native vegetation and do environmental restoration on three acres for every acre damaged.

The corps contends that it damaged nearly an acre and should restore 2.4 acres. That would cost about \$720,000.

Water regulators figure the dumping damaged all 67 acres at both lakes and are requiring restoration of 201 acres at Hansen Dam and along the Los Angeles River. This could cost the corps several million dollars.

The two agencies might still reach a compromise over the damage estimate.

"The most important thing and the real focus has been getting the debris out of the basin here," said Bill Mabie, district director for Council President Alex Padilla, whose district includes Hansen Dam.

"That's the important first step," Mabie said. "Any additional benefit would be great but we'll have to see how it turns out once the dust settles."

Neighborhood activists said they'll monitor the cleanup.

"We know the battle is far from over," said Deb Baumann of the Tujunga Watershed Council and Stakeholders.

"Just because a state regulatory agency and the city of Los Angeles have ordered the corps to remove what they illegally dumped doesn't mean that the corps will do it -- but it's a great start," she said.

The corps has admitted to dumping 1,300 cubic yards of reeds, soil and garbage dredged from Whittier Narrows and Sepulveda Basin into the small lake in April 2002. The following month the agency used the larger lake as a repository for 2,200 cubic yards of soil and 1,650 cubic yards of concrete and rebar left from repairing the swim lake.

Neighbors discovered the dumping and confronted the corps workers, who at the time said they were quietly filling in the lakes to prevent drownings. Corps officials later admitted the dumping was a mistake.

"We are here for the community. We've always been here for the community," Turk said. "This is a minor blip on everything we've done for the community and plan to do for the community."