

Right now just a giant, idle hole

By **ROD BOYCE**
SACRAMENTO UNION STAFF WRITER

Lots of things look a little older after nearly 14 years of sitting around and doing nothing. Even a hole in the ground.

Even a big hole in the ground.

"Some people walk into it, but we don't allow it," said Larry Boll, project superintendent of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's unfinished Auburn Dam.

"None of the trails go through there, no vehicles are allowed, but there are a few that still wander in.

"There have been no major problems there, there isn't much you can do," said Boll, who supervised much of the troubled dam's last active days in the mid-1970s and hopes to supervise a restart before his retirement.

Sporadic crimes were reported when the bureau closed the site, leading to regular patrols by the state Parks and Recreation Department. The California Department of Forestry protects the idle facility from fire.

Two weeks before he left office, President Reagan released a federal budget proposal that includes \$1.7 million to maintain the dead dam for yet another year. About \$400,000 is spent on contracts with local law enforcement agencies for daily patrols, with \$135,000 for fire protection.

Curiosity seekers may even show up in the coming months and years, especially if supporters of a multipurpose "wet" dam succeed in resuscitating a project many had once written off as dead.

But for now, the deep canyon sits quietly with only a backbone of the dam authorized by Congress in 1965.

There's little different now except the advance of Mother Nature — the weeds and bushes have spread and the concrete mix piles have eroded a little.

But beyond that, much is the same. Two old and cracked glass-

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DAM: Weeds grow amid site

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paneled bulletin boards stand on an outdoor project overlook, both containing faded design sketches and notices from the 1960s and 1970s. The dam's original design has since been overhauled.

The dam, which could be California's fifth largest, was originally seen as a source of additional water to parts of Sacramento County, San Joaquin area counties and the rest of the mammoth federal Central Valley Project.

Construction started in 1967, but a mid-1975 earthquake 50 miles away near the Oroville Dam put the future of Auburn on an almost indefinite hold. The bureau's seismic studies and extensive redesign work showed the dam could withstand an earthquake of 6.5 to 6.7 magnitude on the Richter scale.

Some experts, however, suspected the Oroville earthquake occurred because of the massive weight of reservoirs on Sierra fault lines.

Since the 1980 change from a thin eggshell-arc design to a dam stretching in a straight line across the American River's north fork, no decision about completing Auburn has been made.

Subcontractors finished their contracts, most of which dealt with continued foundation work, and bureau employees were re-assigned. The foundation, with some modification, will be used if work resumes.

"Construction was going pretty good then," Boll said. "We had about 250 people up there, I'm not sure."

Then President Carter put the dam on a "hit list" of projects thought to be of questionable value at the time, and funding was withheld, virtually killing the still controversial dam.

But six years later, Sacramento and several other Northern California communities went partially underwater during the February 1986 floods, and Auburn Dam had its rebirth.

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George F. Dent, Michael R. Schaefer and Bea Manning are three of the last four full-time workers in the Auburn Dam's construction office.

4 hold jobs and hope at Auburn Dam site

By Patrick Hoge
Bee Staff Writer

At its peak in the mid-1970s, the Auburn Dam construction office complex housed more than 220 U.S. Bureau of Reclamation employees — engineers, geologists, construction supervisors, surveyors, auto mechanics.

Today there are only four full-time workers in the office, which is perched above the dam site in a bend in the north fork of the American River near Auburn, about 30 miles northeast of Sacramento.

Authorized in 1965, the dam was halted in 1975 because of seismic safety concerns. But though there is no construction going on, the construction office continues to spend more than \$1 million a year, mostly to maintain the dam site and surrounding land.

So far, Auburn Dam has cost \$300 million and it may never be finished. For more than 20 years, civil engineering technician Bea Manning and construction inspector George F. Dent have worked in the office — much of which is now used by the Auburn Union Elementary School District. Secretary Maxine L. Shumaker has been there more than 15 years.

Michael R. Schaefer, chief of the construction division, has been in the office only two years but has been involved with the project since the 1960s when he did water quality studies for the bureau from Sacramento.

'I'm a firm believer that one day there will be a large multipurpose dam here.'
— Michael R. Schaefer, construction chief

that the Auburn Dam has been stalled for so long. But they remain hopeful.

"Are we just sitting up here wasting our time? No, I don't think we are. I'm a firm believer that one day there will be a large multipurpose dam here," said Schaefer as he stood near a row of huge rusted pipes on the construction site where nothing is being built.

The scar of gray bedrock and concrete that would be the dam's footing stretched up the canyon walls on either side.

"If I didn't believe that a final decision in favor of the project would be made in the next five years, I would be very anxious to move on," he said. "I want to be here when it's built."