



Accident Database

Report ID# 119378

Help

2025-04-19

Date

Russell Mayfield

Victim

65

Victim Age

Kings (4. Pine Flat Dam to Centerville

River

4. Pine Flat Dam to Centerville (Route 180)

Section

Low Head Dam underneath bridge, just upstream of Put in United States California, US

Location

1600 cfs

Gage

Low

Water Level

II

River Difficulty

Cause Code(s)

– Caught in Low Head Dam Hydraulic

Injury Type(s)

Factors

– Other

Private

Trip Type

Inflatable Kayak

Boat Type

Reported

Status

Accident Description

Fresno County Sheriff's Office (FCSO) reported that Russell Mayfield, age 65, died in the hospital after being trapped in the gauging weir underneath the bridge just downstream of Pine Flat Dam. This weir is immediately upstream of the river put in. It was reported that witnesses threw a rope to Mayfield, but that he was not able to hang on. Sheriff's deputies who were nearby training in river rescue, came to the location and retrieved Mayfield from the river. The reports imply that Mayfield was pulled from the river downstream of the gauging weir. The FCSO stated that Mayfield was wearing a life jacket, but that it was halfway unzipped. The gauging weir underneath the bridge at Pine Flat Dam is a death trap and is documented as such in the AW river page for this section of river.

There is a Deadly Hazard just upstream of the put-in. A gauging weir (low head dam), is underneath the bridge upstream of the put-in. There is no easy way to get a complete look at this weir, but looking down from the bridge, you can watch the water boiling up to the surface then rushing back upstream under the bridge. No floating object or person can escape once sucked in. It is a classic 'low head dam' with a steep drop and strong reversal that will drown anyone who ventures too close and who is not quickly rescued from outside. Signs warn of the danger and direct you to launch at least 300 feet downstream of this bridge. See the 'killing machine' pictures below. Three people have died here in 40 years, according to one knowledgeable source at Army Corp. A few others have been rescued before they perished.

The backwash is long and steep. Pulling someone out through the backwash is very difficult and requires multiple people pulling on a rope. The swimmer will not be able to hang on unless the rope is attached or wrapped around their body.

The weir is divided into 6 sections by 5 concrete bridge supports. There is a very strong upstream flow alongside the bridge supports. This flow starts further downstream from the bridge than boaters might realize. It seems likely that Mayfield was curious and paddled near the weir to get a view. The upstream current could have caught him and pulled him in from what he thought was a safe distance. It is remarkable that witnesses had a rope and were able to throw it to him. That he was not able to hang on, is unsurprising. The recirculation is extremely strong, and the typical way of hanging on to a rope would mean his face was mostly submerged.

The reports state that Mayfield's life jacket was partly unzipped, but this is most likely caused by the violent recirculation. Recirculations usually strip life jackets off, given enough time.



Produced under a grant from the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund, administered by the U.S. Coast Guard.



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