



Temperance Flat Dam is dead. Now Valley lawmakers need to come up with fresh ideas

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The Temperance Flat dam died last week, a symbolic stake driven through its concrete heart.

Hard as this might be for our elected representatives to accept, there's really only one course of action left:

Let it go.

After that, get their collective heads together and come up with a solution for the central San Joaquin Valley's water storage woes that makes sense in the 21st century – one that has an actual chance for statewide approval.



Logan Page looks over the gorge containing the upper reaches of Millerton Lake near Temperance Flat in this file photo. The proposed Temperance Flat dam would be beyond the first ridge in the center of the photo. MARK CROSSE Fresno Bee File Photo

Temperance Flat is not that project. That was the clear message delivered by the California Water Commission after members voted to [dole out only a puny portion](#) of the Proposition 1 funding its supporters sought.

Of course, our local leaders won't see it that way. Not when it's oh-so-much easier to remain in a state of denial while railing against Sacramento and environmentalists.

[Which they all predictably did.](#) When you've hitched your wagon to a lame horse for as long these guys have, you're typically the last to notice when the wheels come off.

"The bottom line is we're not giving up," Congressman Jim Costa said.

"This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to save, store, move and use millions of acre-feet of water – water that is now wasted and recklessly flushed to the sea," opined Assemblyman Jim Patterson, showing either ignorance or complete disregard for statewide ecology.



“That corrupt system just revealed themselves,” former Fresno mayor Alan Autry concluded.

Lots of hot air, little actual substance and no alternative plan.

After decades of debate over the Temperance Flat dam, it doesn’t matter how you, I or any lawmaker feels about its merits. Those arguments have all been made and heard. No one’s changing anyone’s mind.

What matters is that the most readily available funding source to come along in ages – supporters sought to cover about \$1 billion of project’s \$2.7 billion price tag from Prop. 1 – just dried up.

Why? You can either believe our local pols, that the rest of the state is out to screw Valley farmers, or look at the actual rationale.

In an attempt to remove politicking from the process over which water projects get money from Prop. 1, the bond’s language restricted taxpayer spending to the parts that provide “[measurable public benefits](#).” Three examples are flood control, ecosystem improvements and recreation.

Simply put, supporters of the Temperance Flat dam [could not convince the commission](#) the reservoir would benefit anyone besides those who already suck up most the water stored in the San Joaquin River drainage.

Reservoir backers angrily dispute this while pointing to their own studies and formulas that show oodles of public benefit. Which there very well could be.

Problem is, supporters based their conclusions on one modeling system while the commission used another. Which makes absolutely no sense.

It’s like a diplomatic delegation heading to a foreign country for negotiations without bothering to learn that country’s language or customs. What did they think would happen?



This is a view to the north over the edge of Big Table Mountain into the gorge containing the upper reaches of Millerton Lake near Temperance Flat. The proposed Temperance Flat dam would be constructed roughly where the lake is obscured by the ridge coming in from the right.

MARK CROSSE Fresno Bee file

In addition, the Department of Fish and Wildlife also flatly rejected the notion that a larger reservoir upstream of Millerton Lake would benefit federally mandated but imperiled salmon runs.

While Temperance Flat backers will undoubtedly add salmon to their list of most despised fish species, joining the Delta smelt, there's also this inescapable irony: If Friant Dam wasn't allowed to cut off a major river for decades – the only dam in the state permitted to operate in such a manner – there would've been no need for the [salmon restoration settlement](#) that we all now must abide.

Much has been made of the fact that California has not built any major reservoirs since 1979 when New Melones came on line. There are reasons for this. For one, most of the best sites and major rivers already have dams on them. Temperance Flat would be the 10th dam on the San Joaquin, which in most years is already “fully appropriated.”

Not only are dams expensive to build, they also run afoul of environmental regulations that were not in place when California enjoyed its dam-building heyday. And before you start blaming liberals for this, keep in mind the California Environmental Quality Act was signed into law by Gov. Ronald Reagan in 1968. Not to mention the Endangered Species Act, signed by President Richard Nixon in 1973.

Finally, there's been an evolution in thinking. Giant reservoirs impounded by massive dams may have been the best option for water storage in 1958, but not so much in 2018.

On the Colorado River, which supplies much of Southern California, the levels of Lake Mead outside Las Vegas [continue to drop](#) because of too little snowmelt from the Rockies. Upstream, [there is serious talk](#) of removing Glen Canyon Dam and draining Lake Powell. Why? Because so much water stored there evaporates and seeps.

Unfortunately, our elected officials are stuck in their outmoded views. The only water storage solution they've come up with is one that will never muster any support outside the Valley.

But instead of accepting the reality, they complain loudly and pledge to keep up the fight – even though they must know deep down the Temperance Flat dam has been deep-sixed. Which is what politicians do when they don't want to accept reality and haven't offered any other ideas.

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Leaders from across the central San Joaquin Valley gathered Friday, May 4, 2018 to express their anger and frustration with the California Water Commission after it voted to minimally fund the Temperance Flat reservoir project. BRIANNA CALIX bcalix@fresnobee.com

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