

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Editorial: More water storage doesn't mean build more dams

*Chronicle Editorial Board*

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The California Water Commission [has been meeting](#) this week to discuss how to invest \$2.7 billion in water storage funds approved by voters under Proposition 1. The commission — and all Californians — should bear in mind that water storage doesn't necessarily mean a dam with water behind it. The commission's charge is not to fund the biggest new dam but to fund projects with the greatest net benefits to California cities, farms and wildlife.



Looking out over the Los Vaqueros Reservoir.

The Chronicle Photo: Michael Macor,

The commission is considering [12 projects](#), ranging from traditional surface storage projects, such as the proposed Sites and Temperance Flat reservoirs, to multiple use projects such as expanding Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County or the Inland Empire Utilities Agency's project, which would time water releases for benefit of the native fish runs and farmers.

Under Prop. 1, the funds must go to "the public benefit aspects of water storage projects: specifically, ecosystem improvement, water quality improvement, flood control, recreation and emergency response." Controversy arose, however, when commission staff released [assessments](#) last month. State Sen. Andy Vidak, R-Hanford (Kings County), wrote in a news release that the commission would "stiff the Central Valley" by dedicating less money to big dam projects.

There's a reason no big dam has been built in the state since New Melones in 1978: there is no site left that would justify the enormous engineering and construction costs. More dams paid for with the public dime doesn't mean more water for every Californian. It is the state's complex water rights laws that determine who gets the water, assuming nature provides it.

California is already dammed up. Over 55 years, California saw 800 new dams — more than one a month. The state has an inventory of close to 1,200 dams (plus another 200 under federal control) but no over-arching plan to maintain, monitor or remove them when they are past their engineered life span. The Oroville Dam spillway fracture, which forced the evacuation in February 2017 of nearly 200,000 people downstream, was a wake-up call.

Groundwater storage, storm water capture and recycled water are more efficient, less costly storage solutions that balance human and environmental needs, in part because the water can be stored closer to users.

In the 20th century, big engineering projects — the Panama Canal, Hoover Dam and the Interstate Freeway system — embodied the can-do spirit Americans prize. Today, we must use that can-do spirit to engineer for the challenges of a changing climate — extended dry periods with intermittent torrential rains. It's time to look beyond big dams.

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