

## A 20-year push for valley water storage ends, as Temperance Flat calls it quits

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By Brad Hooker

The proposed [Temperance Flat Reservoir](#) Project has likely seen its final blow after more than two decades of hard-fought efforts. With tepid interest from water contractors, the project is unlikely to meet a critical deadline for drafting an operating plan.

The project authority attributed the loss to a cascading series of impending water crises over the years that have detracted local water contractors from investing in the reservoir. The effort has been crippled by state agencies as well, along with a price tag that did not pencil out well for farmers. The backers have faced fierce opposition from environmental groups.



Friant Dam, which is downstream from the proposed site of Temperance Flat

“Temperance Flat may have a future, but it obviously doesn't have it right now,” said Daniel Curtin of the California Water Commission during a meeting last week. “The time wasn’t right for it.”

While the deadline has not been reached yet, the Temperance Flat Authority’s Aaron Fukuda wanted to give the commission early notice so they could make plans to return the funds already invested in the project. He hoped the money would instead go to other water infrastructure projects to benefit the Central Valley. This would more than double the amount invested in adapting to the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, he added.

In what was seen then as a major setback to the project, the Water Commission had granted \$171 million to the authority in 2018 through the Proposition 1 water bond. The authority had requested \$1 billion—the commission provided nearly that much for the proposed Sites Reservoir Project in Northern California.



Bill Swanson, vice president for water resources planning and management at Stantec

“That raised a lot of concerns, obviously among the potential investors, of where is the rest of the money going to come from,” said Bill Swanson, an engineer with the design firm Stantec, which has been consulting on the project.

In a [July confirmation](#) hearing to reappoint Carol Baker to the Water Commission, Senate Republican Leader Shannon Grove of Bakersfield urged a “no” vote, arguing Baker was to blame for the decision on Prop. 1 funding. Citing a low environmental feasibility score from commission staff, Baker abstained rather than be the swing vote.

“It costs a lot of farmers in the Central Valley water to be able to feed your constituents,” said Grove during the floor debate, adding that Baker’s confirmation “is not good for anybody.”

Ron Stork, an environmental advocate with Friends of the River, argued last week that the State Water Resources Control Board already considers the river fully appropriated.

Doug Obegi, a policy advocate for the Natural Resources Defense Council, told the commission that Temperance Flat “threatened the viability” of the San Joaquin River Restoration Settlement that was ironed out between the environmental group, the Friant Water Authority and federal agencies. He said capturing more water from the river, even excess flood flows, would have damaged threatened fish populations downstream.

The settlement agreement was also cited as one of the crises that impacted the fate of the project and consumed the time and money of the more than 30 irrigation districts that would benefit from the reservoir. After the parties reached a compromise, the valley and the entire state fell into an extreme drought and attention pivoted to the development and implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act in 2014. The drought exacerbated the drinking water crisis as well, along with other water quality issues in the valley, like salinity and nitrate contamination.

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Research by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) has found that infrastructure dollars would go much further by improving the operations of existing dams and the water grid to maximize groundwater storage. At \$1.3 billion, Temperance Flat [would have cost farmers](#) \$565 per acre-foot of water, which PPIC found to be too costly. While the \$2 billion from Prop. 1 helped advance Temperance Flat and Sites Reservoirs—along with expansions for Pacheco and Los Vaqueros—it was only a small share of the total funding needed, [according to PPIC](#). Combined with raising Shasta Dam, those investments would boost the state’s reservoir storage by about 9%. But annual water deliveries would only increase by 1%.

“Improving operations of existing dams and the water grid to maximize groundwater storage is key for managing the hotter droughts and larger floods that climate change is expected to bring,” note the PPIC researchers.

The proponents of Temperance Flat sold the idea to local agencies as a mechanism for buying water storage accounts. The districts would have allocations proportional to their investment in the reservoir, which would carry over from year to year.

The Temperance Flat Authority worked in collaboration with the Department of Water Resources and the Bureau of Reclamation on environmental reviews and feasibility studies. Without an operating plan, however, Reclamation cannot continue with the feasibility report, according to Swanson. The authority is also not likely to gain either funding commitments for 75% of the cost or a California environmental review before the January 2022 deadline.

“The statute itself, which was a masterpiece of political work, was at the same time very typical of political work,” said Curtis. “It was a mishmash of a lot of conflicting interests. It was almost destined for Temperance Flat to run into a brick wall here.”

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