



FRESNOLAND

Temperance Flat Dam returns \$171 million to state. Still, backers swear it's 'not dead'

*By Monica Vaughan and Danielle Bergstrom
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The proposed Temperance Flat dam would be beyond the first ridge in the center of this photo. MARK CROSSE Fresno Bee Staff Photo

Backers of a \$3 billion project to construct the second tallest dam in California swear the project isn't dead, despite the [Temperance Flat Reservoir Authority](#) returning money and canceling applications.

After it became clear that the reservoir project on the San Joaquin River west of Auberry would not reach upcoming deadlines for studies and funding, [Temperance Flat Reservoir Authority declined \\$171 million](#) designated by the California Water Commission and withdrew its application for additional funding, according to a resolution signed by the Authority on Oct. 30.

It's a sign the project hasn't attracted the additional financial backers needed.

Even so, "Temperance Flat is not dead," said Tulare Irrigation District engineer Aaron Fukuda, a project proponent and former spokesman for the Authority. He insisted, rather, that the project is "in a holding pattern."

Ron Stork, senior policy advocate with conservation organization Friends of the River, said it's time for San Joaquin Valley officials to move on from the reservoir project to focus on solving the Valley's water problems.

"It's more important for the Valley to concentrate on the real world challenges that the Valley faces: that it's using more water than it has," Stork said. "This dam is not much of a solution to that problem."

"That it is not financeable is telling. It's not easy to pull off, and it's not very much water," Stork said. "All around, it's pretty much a deadbeat dam."

WHERE WILL THE MONEY GO NOW?

The [Temperance Flat Reservoir Authority in October requested the California Water Commission use the funds](#) elsewhere in the San Joaquin Valley for other storage projects, which Fukuda said could include groundwater recharge.

The funds aren't guaranteed to stay in the San Joaquin Valley, but at its Dec. 16 meeting, the California Water Commission voted to open a process to accept new water storage proposals that could be funded by the \$171 million previously designated for Temperance Flat.

The commission will examine options to increase funding allocations to adjust for inflation for already funded projects, or to fund projects in their third tier of priority which had never been funded — including the Willow Springs Water Bank and Kern Fan Groundwater Storage, both in Kern County.

[In a letter sent to the California Water Commission](#) earlier this month, Tal Eslick, spokesperson for the Temperance Flat Reservoir Authority, said the commission preferred the funds be committed to critically over-drafted groundwater basins in the San Joaquin Valley.

Water district managers throughout the San Joaquin Valley are scrambling to implement the state's new groundwater management law, which requires that they implement plans to sustainably manage water by reducing pumping — or build more storage projects to capture water.

The funds were awarded to the reservoir project in 2018 and there hasn't been much development since.

FLOODING THE SAN JOAQUIN RIVER GORGE FOR STORAGE?

The reservoir is pitched as new water storage, with ability to provide an additional 1.26 million acre-feet capacity, while managing water supplies from inflow that exceeds the current capacity of Millerton Lake.

The new dam will be located within the footprint of Millerton Lake, flooding part of the San Joaquin River Gorge up to Kerckhoff Dam.

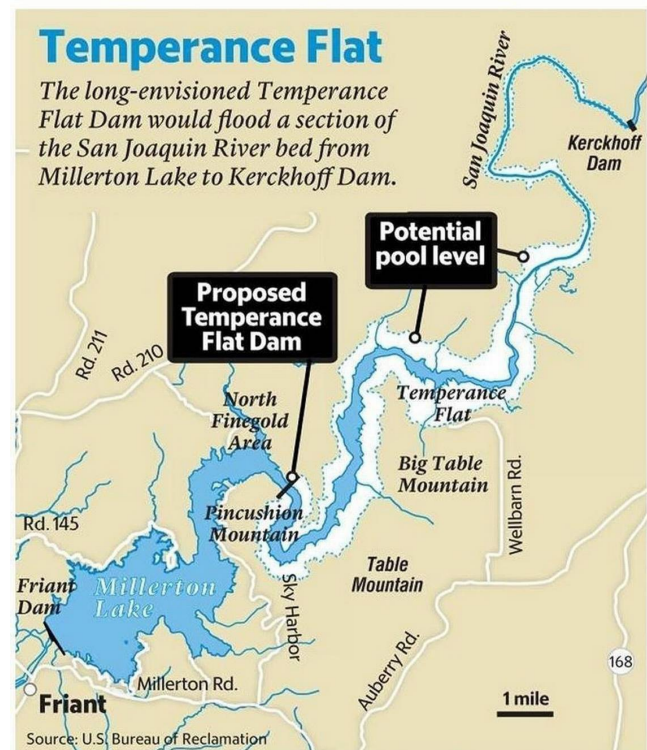
Water storage is meaningless without water to fill it. The waters of the San Joaquin River are [over-subscribed by 867%](#), according to a 2014 research paper from Josh Viers, UC Merced watershed sciences professor.

Fukuda, however, says Millerton behind Friant Dam is too small to store all the water that flows through during high-flow years like 2017 and 2019.

“Mother nature is pretty fickle,” Fukuda said. The water flows, “you need someplace to put it.”

The proposed dam would flood the San Joaquin River Gorge to create the reservoir, something that Stork, a long time critic of the project, said isn’t worth it. People enjoy the area for recreation, and the San Joaquin River Restoration project argued the project would harm restoration efforts.

“And then, there is the little matter that they can’t get water rights for the project, and it doesn’t squeeze out much water,” Stork said. “It’d like it to die a quiet and unlamented death.”



The Fresno Bee



Monica Vaughan is a water and development reporter for Fresnoland, a team of journalists within the Fresno Bee focused on affordable housing, development, water and neighborhood inequality in the central San Joaquin Valley. In 2019, she was awarded a McClatchy President’s Award for reporting on the health effects of bad air quality. She has won several awards from the California News Publisher Association for investigative reporting, feature writing and public service journalism.



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<https://www.fresnobee.com/fresnoland/article247954390.html>

FOR Addendum: None of the eight storage projects that received funding allocations from the California Water Commission have received funding for construction yet, not just the Willow Springs Water Bank and the Kern Fan Water Storage Projects. Instead, projects have received funding allocations for pieces of the \$2.7 billion available from the California Water Bond (Proposition 1) passed in 2014. However, rank three projects (which had a lower priority on available funds than rank two projects) might have received larger allocations if more funds had been available. With the surrender of the proposed Temperance Flat dam's allocation, the Commission is considering increasing the funding allocations for the rank three projects Willow Springs Water Bank and the Kern Fan Water Storage Projects.