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Big water moves mark Brown's final months

Dan Walters July 28, 2018 Updated: July 28, 2018 10:07 p.m.

Nearly six decades ago, shortly after becoming governor, Pat Brown persuaded the Legislature and voters to approve one of the nation's largest public works projects, the State Water Plan.

New reservoirs in Northern California, including the nation's highest dam at Oroville on the Feather River, would capture runoff from snowfall in the Sierra, and a miles-long aqueduct would carry water southward to San Joaquin Valley farms and fast-growing Southern California cities.



Fisherman try their luck along the California Aqueduct near Tracy. The aqueduct is part of the State Water Plan pushed by Gov. Jerry Brown's father when he was governor decades ago.
Photo: Michael Macor / The Chronicle 2005

As a gesture to what was then a nascent environmental movement, the water plan included a "peripheral canal" to carry water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and thus, it was said, protect its fish and other wildlife.

However, the canal was never built, and the California Aqueduct, named for Pat Brown, continued to pump water from the delta itself, which, as feared, degraded the estuary's habitat.

Two decades after the water plan was approved, Pat's son, Jerry, became governor and muscled authorization for the canal through the Legislature, only to see an odd-bedfellows alliance of San Joaquin Valley farmers and environmental groups block it via a 1982 referendum.

Three-plus decades later, a new version of the peripheral canal — twin tunnels to carry water beneath the delta — emerged. Then Jerry Brown re-emerged for a second governorship and adopted the tunnels, later dubbed WaterFix, as his own.

Brown now has only a few months before relinquishing the office again, and he is trying, almost desperately, to move the project to the point of certainty and may succeed.

The chief cheerleader for the tunnels, Southern California's Metropolitan Water District, has declared its political and financial support and with its partners has applied for a federal loan to get it going.

There are still legal, financial and environmental hurdles, but it's at least a 50-50 bet that Jerry Brown will finally complete the most significant piece of his father's legacy, and add a bit to his own.

The peripheral canal/twin tunnels saga exemplifies the difficulty of making water policy in California. However, the project is not the only big water action in the final months of Brown's second incarnation, driven by seemingly chronic drought.

Brown's Water Resources Control Board is on the verge of reordering water allocations on a grand scale, reducing what farmers can take from tributaries to the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers to provide more flows through the delta.

"It's an important milestone," board Chairwoman Felicia Marcus said. "We've laid out a framework ... for taking the next step in reconciling ourselves with the natural world in a way that has been on the plate for decades."

There would seem to be a conflict between a new allocation policy to give the delta more water, and the twin tunnels, which would divert water from flowing into the

delta. In fact, some critics say the plan is a way of indirectly shifting water from farmers to Southern California.

The plan also contains the seeds of a long-brewing conflict over water rights — whether those with senior upstream rights dating back more than a hundred years can be compelled to give up water by state decree.

Finally, the state Water Commission last week began allocating several billion dollars in state bond money to build new water storage reservoirs, including a chunk for the 1.8 million acre-foot Sites Reservoir on the west side of the Sacramento Valley.

Sites is not too far from the Colusa County retirement home that Jerry Brown is building on land that his pioneer ancestors first acquired in the 19th century. It's been said that his father's childhood visits to the naturally semiarid region were his inspiration for the State Water Plan.

Dan Walters is a columnist for CALmatters, a public interest journalism venture committed to explaining how California's state Capitol works and why it matters. For more stories by him, go to calmatters.org/commentary.



Dan Walters has been a journalist for nearly 57 years, spending all but a few of those years working for California newspapers. He began his professional career in 1960, at age 16, at the Humboldt Times in Eureka, while still attending high school, and turned down a National Merit scholarship to continue working as a journalist. At one point in his career, at age 22, he was the nation's youngest daily newspaper editor. The Hanford Sentinel was the first of three newspaper editor positions before joining the Sacramento Union's Capitol bureau in 1975, just as Jerry Brown began his governorship. Walters later became the Union's Capitol bureau chief, and in 1981 began writing the state's only daily newspaper column devoted to California political, economic and social events. In 1984, he and the column moved to The Sacramento Bee. He has written more than 9,000 columns about California and its politics and his column has appeared in many other California newspapers. Walters has written about California and its politics for a number of other publications, including The Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor. In 1986, his book, "The New California: Facing the 21st Century," was published in its first edition. He is also the founding editor of the "California Political Almanac," the co-author of a book on lobbying entitled "The Third House: Lobbyists, Money and Power in Sacramento," and contributed chapters to two other books, "Remaking California" and "The New Political Geography of California. He also has been a frequent guest on national television news shows, commenting on California politics. Email: dan@calmatters.org

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