



## Commentary: Sites Reservoir offers innovative water solutions

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*By Jim Watson*

Managing our state's water resources remains one of the greatest challenges that will continue to face California policy makers well into the future.

The state's water infrastructure is getting older and stressed beyond its capabilities. Our demands for water to serve our communities, to fuel our economy and to preserve our environment have increased far beyond what the system was designed to reliably and sustainably support. Changing weather conditions only exacerbate an already unsustainable situation.



Jim Watson

As we experienced in the 2012-16 drought, our current water management system simply can no longer support our ability to manage through future droughts without incurring severe and dire consequences to our communities, farms, businesses and the environment. Now more than ever, California needs to address its statewide water management challenges by implementing innovative solutions that address our state's need for a sustainable and affordable water supply.

When operating, Sites Reservoir will provide significantly more water during drier periods, to become a new drought-management tool to address California's water management challenges into the 21st century and beyond. Innovative and environmentally sound, Sites Reservoir will provide water to enhance the environment when it can provide greater benefits and provide a resilient and reliable supply of water for our communities, farms and businesses.

Located 10 miles west of the town of Maxwell in rural Colusa County, the Sites Reservoir would be a 1.8 million acre-foot offstream storage facility that captures and stores stormwater flows in the Sacramento River—after all other water rights and regulatory requirements are met—for release in dry and critical years for environmental use and for California communities, farms and businesses when it is so desperately needed.



To be built in this basin 10 miles west of Maxwell in Colusa County, Sites Reservoir would capture stormwater flows from the Sacramento River and hold the water in an offstream facility. During dry periods, the water would be available for environmental enhancement and to improve reliability of supplies for communities, farms and businesses. Photo/Christine Souza

When operated in coordination with other Northern California reservoirs such as Shasta, Oroville and Folsom, which function as the backbone to both the Central Valley Project and the State Water Project, Sites Reservoir will greatly increase the flexibility, reliability and resiliency of statewide water supplies in drier years for environmental, agricultural and urban uses. It will increase the overall surface storage capacity in the Sacramento Valley by 15 percent, which will become a critical resource to manage through the next drought.

Simply put, Sites Reservoir can significantly improve the state's existing water management system in drier years and restore the much-needed flexibility that has been lost. Had Sites Reservoir been operational in 2017, California would have had a staggering 1.8 million acre-feet of additional water stored. This vital water supply would be available to meet the needs of our communities, farms, businesses and the environment during dry water years or during the next drought, when a reliable water supply is needed the most.

Currently, water reliability for communities, farms and businesses depends on a healthy ecosystem. An exciting component of Sites Reservoir is to provide federal and state resource agencies with a dedicated and reliable supply of water they can manage to provide environmental benefits, especially during drier years. This includes providing up to half of the project's annual water supplies to environmental flows, which will improve conditions for delta smelt; help preserve cold-water pools in Shasta later into the summer months to support salmon development, spawning and rearing; and improve Pacific Flyway habitat for migratory birds and other native species.

In addition, Sites Reservoir will benefit the local and regional economy in a portion of California that continues to struggle economically. It will create hundreds of construction-related jobs during each year of the seven-year construction period, and nearly 60 long-term jobs related to operations and recreation. Additionally, it will help to protect the thousands of regional and statewide jobs for people in rural and urban communities whose livelihoods are tied to our state's vibrant agricultural economy.

Several Northern California public agencies are developing Sites Reservoir to operate in a sensible and sustainable manner that helps the state meet its water system needs. Widely supported both regionally and statewide, the project has made significant progress.

In 2018, Sites was awarded \$816 million in funding from the Proposition 1 water bond. Just a few months later, the project secured a \$449 million investment from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation plans to become a significant cost-sharing partner.

As 2019 unfolds, the Sites Project Authority will advance the project's permitting and environmental review, as it concurrently continues development of the project's engineering design and operational parameters. The Sites Project Authority will continue working with our current partners and is seeking additional partners to participate in the project.

Sites Reservoir truly is a 21st century solution to some of California's toughest water supply challenges. The time is right to build on this momentum and growing support, to ensure Sites Reservoir gets across the finish line before the next drought.

For more information, please visit [www.sitesproject.org](http://www.sitesproject.org).

*(Jim Watson is general manager of the Sites Project Authority in Maxwell.)*

#### Sites Reservoir's primary benefits

- Reliable dry-year water for California communities, farms and businesses
- Improved water quality
- Groundwater recharge
- Environmental water in dry years for native fish and Pacific Flyway habitat for migratory birds and other native species
- Contribution to California renewable energy goals
- Flood management
- Recreational opportunities
- Job protection and creation

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