



ENVIRONMENT, WATER, COMMENTARY

California needs Sites Reservoir. Here's why

BY GUEST COMMENTARY

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California's aging water infrastructure desperately needs an upgrade.

Shorter, more intense rain storms, less snowpack and more prolonged stretches of drought reflect the reality of climate change. There's no one project, no single action, that will save California from a dry and unreliable water future.

We need a broad portfolio of solutions that includes storage above and below ground, conservation, and other options such as traditional recycled and potable reuse to help ensure we can better manage this vital resource when the next inevitable drought comes along.

And we also need cooperation at local, state and federal levels to advance a 21st century solution.

One part of that solution is the [proposed Sites Reservoir](#).

Located in Colusa and Glenn counties west of the Sacramento River, Sites would be multi-benefit 1.8-million-acre foot reservoir. It would capture and store storm water capture that currently runs to the ocean.

Today, much rainfall from extreme storms, especially those that occur back-to-back when the ground is saturated, runs off before it can be conserved for use when environmental, urban and agricultural needs are greater.

Sites Reservoir would capture a portion of that water for use during drier periods, and would become part of other drought-management tools that would address California's water management challenges into the 21st century and beyond.

Simply put, Sites Reservoir would significantly improve the state's existing water management system in drier years and restore much needed flexibility in the water grid.

If Sites Reservoir had been operational this year, California would have been able to capture more than one million acre-feet of additional water. An average California household uses between one-half and one acre-foot of water per year.

Each year we delay in building Sites Reservoir we lose an opportunity to increase the value of storm-related water and excess flood flows for multiple benefits, including the environment.

In fact, Sites Reservoir would help provide critical environmental benefits that do not currently exist, but are needed to help aquatic species and other habitat withstand drier year conditions. Up to 40% of the project's water would be dedicated for state and federal agencies to address these environmental needs.

With the continued onset of climate change, the cold water stored in other, upstream, major reservoirs will be less, making it more difficult to manage the temperature of water released for salmon and other species downstream.

During drier periods, the operation of Sites Reservoir will allow Shasta, Oroville and Folsom reservoirs to conserve more cold water later into the summer months for the benefit of fisheries.

In addition, Sites Reservoir would benefit the local and regional economy in a portion of California that continues to struggle economically, through job creation and local flood protection.

Project construction would create hundreds of jobs during the construction period of seven years, using a skilled and trained workforce, who would be paid a living wage to support a strong middle class in Northern California.

In addition, Sites would provide critically-needed flood protection to disadvantaged communities and to Interstate 5, which was closed twice in the last three years due to major floods in Colusa County.

Several Northern California public agencies are developing Sites Reservoir to operate in a sensible and sustainable manner that helps the state balance the needs for environmental, urban and agricultural water supplies.

Because of its many benefits, the project enjoys broad support and has secured \$816 million in state funding and \$449 million in federal funding. Currently, 29 agencies throughout California are participating in the project's development, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has signaled its intent to become a major cost-sharing partner.

California must modernize its water supply systems. We believe, along with many others, that Sites is a critical piece to the puzzle. With Gov. Gavin Newsom in office and a new energy in the Capitol, we must advance this project.

The voters in 2014 overwhelmingly passed Proposition 1, which expressed the voters' desire that more water storage needs to be in place before the next drought. California simply can't afford to wait any longer to build Sites Reservoir.

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