

COMMENTARY

Finally, progress on vital Sites Reservoir project

BY DAN WALTERS
MARCH 22, 2022



Lake Oroville State Recreation Area. Image via California Department of Parks and Recreation

IN SUMMARY

The likelihood of a \$2.2 billion federal loan increases the possibility that the Sites Reservoir, a vital step in protecting California's water supply, will be constructed.

Simple logic tells us that as climate change alters precipitation patterns, California must expand its capacity to capture and store water.

Even if the overall amount of precipitation remains unchanged, we will receive more of it in the form of rain and less as snow, which means the natural reservoir of the Sierra snow pack will decline as a water source.

We can prepare for that decline by creating more storage, either in new reservoirs or by replenishing underground aquifers. However, despite the urgency of the situation

– one underscored by the [current drought](#) – California politicians have been lackadaisical about doing what needs to be done.

Local and regional water authorities have been more diligent. Southern California's recent construction of more storage capacity is one reason it is less affected by the current drought than Northern California.

Belatedly, increasing storage is moving upward on the political agenda. Last week, the federal Environmental Protection Agency invited sponsors of the [Sites Reservoir project](#), which has been on the back burner for decades, to apply for a \$2.2 billion loan that would cover roughly 40% of the project's estimated cost.

Along with some state water bond money and commitments from prospective users of the project – Southern California water agencies, mostly – Sites is now in position to put together a financing package to make it a reality.

“We've definitely turned the corner and we have a nice tailwind at our back,” said Jerry Brown, executive director of the Sites Project Authority. Brown is not related to former Gov. Jerry Brown, whose Colusa County retirement home, incidentally, is not far from Sites.

It's not going to happen immediately, despite the urgency of the situation. Just assembling the loan package and getting approval could take several years and there are other hurdles to clear. Nevertheless, the strong possibility of a federal loan is a huge step forward.

If it becomes reality, the reservoir would be constructed on the west side of the Sacramento Valley, west of Maxwell. It would have a capacity of up to 1.8 million acre-feet of water, about half the size of the state's Lake Oroville, but unlike Oroville, would not dam a major river.

Sites would be an off-stream reservoir, similar to – and slightly smaller than – the [San Luis Reservoir](#) in the Pacheco Pass west of Los Banos. During periods of high precipitation and runoff, Sacramento River water would be pumped into Sites, then released back into the river as needed for agriculture, residential use or to maintain flows for fish.

As an off-stream reservoir, Sites escapes at least some of the traditional opposition to big water projects from environmental groups, but there is some criticism that it could be used to divert water during low precipitation periods.

“It’s just a, kind of, different way of thinking about it,” project boss Brown told the Associated Press. “There’s a lot of fear and distrust and we have to operate in a way that we, you know, secure trust and address the fears.”

The good news about Sites should be kept in perspective. It’s just one of many steps that California must take to protect its vital water supply from the potential ravages of climate change.

It’s entirely possible that climate change will not only change the mix of precipitation – more rain and less snow – but reduce the overall volume of water that falls on California, thus making more storage even more crucial while forcing us to rethink the entire pattern of water use.

Nothing is more critical to California’s future.

[Donate](#): Become a CalMatters member today to stay informed, bolster our nonpartisan news and expand knowledge across California.



Dan Walters has been a journalist for more than 60 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 and in 2017 to CalMatters.org. He has written more than 10,000 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.

<https://calmatters.org/commentary/2022/03/finally-progress-on-vital-sites-reservoir-project/>