

Environmentalists blast Newsom again, this time for ‘streamlining’ Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento Valley



Conservationists worry the proposed Sites Reservoir project in the Sacramento Valley could harm the Sacramento River.
Photograph by Dan Bacher

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Despite strong opposition from indigenous tribes, fishing groups and conservation organizations, Governor Gavin Newsom took action in early November to fast-track the Sites Reservoir project, utilizing “new tools” from the controversial [infrastructure streamlining package](#) to “build more faster.”

“We’re cutting red tape to build more faster,” proclaimed Newsom. “These are projects that will address our state’s biggest challenges faster, and the Sites Reservoir is fully representative of that goal – making sure Californians have access to clean drinking water and making sure we’re more resilient against future droughts.”

You can read the certification here: www.gov.ca.gov/...

The Sites Reservoir Project, an off stream water storage facility being promoted by the California Department of Water Resources, would be located on the west side of the Sacramento Valley, approximately 10 miles west of Maxwell in Glenn and Colusa Counties.

On November 2, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Sites Project Authority [finalized](#) the Environmental Impact Review, or EIR, and the Environmental Impact Statement – EIS – for the project.

The Governor’s Office claims that the Sites project, if approved, will “capture water during wet seasons and store it for use during drier seasons – holding up to 1.5 million acre-feet of water, enough for 3 million households’ yearly usage.”

The [project](#) has received a total of \$46.75 million in early funding from the state. In all, Sites is eligible for \$875.4 million of Proposition 1 funding. The total project cost is estimated at \$4 billion.

However, the Sierra Club and other environmental groups blasted the certification of Sites Reservoir for judicial streamlining under Senate Bill 149, describing the project as “environmentally destructive.”

“The State Water Board is currently moving forward with updates to the Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan that could provide increased freshwater flows to address long-standing challenges with water quality, salinity, harmful algal blooms, and support the needs of imperiled fish and wildlife,” the Sierra Club said in a statement. “Instead of ensuring Sites is in compliance with the most updated regulations, the Governor has decided to fast-track this project when it is unclear at best whether water is going to be available for diversion.”

[SB 149](#) (2023) was part of the package of infrastructure streamlining legislation that the Governor jammed through the legislature earlier this year, according to opponents. [Sierra Club California joined a broad coalition of organizations in opposition to the Governor’s proposal](#) that “made significant changes to key environmental laws that protect wildlife, facilitate public transparency, and hold agencies accountable through the judicial review process.”

“The environmentally destructive Sites Reservoir project should not be eligible for certification under the new infrastructure streamlining law,” said Erin Woolley, Senior Policy Strategist for Sierra Club California. “Building new dams and reservoirs is an idea of the past, and perpetuates the very challenges we need to address.”

Woolley went on, “California must do more to address long-standing water management challenges at the local level and ensure that all Californians have access to clean, affordable drinking water. The Legislature must take a critical eye to this proposal and ensure that the limitations built into SB 149 are meaningfully applied.”

Fish and water advocates also noted that SB 149 requires that the Governor certify a water-related project only if “greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the project will be mitigated to the extent feasible.”

Instead, they said the Sites Project will “move the state backwards on its own ambitious climate goals.”

Recent research by Tell the Dam Truth, supported by Friends of the River and Patagonia, [reveals that Sites will emit 362,000 metric tons of CO2e annually, mostly in the form of methane](#), a significantly more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. This is the equivalent to the annual emissions from over 80,000 gas-powered cars.

“Contrary to the Governor’s certification, the Sites Project Authority has not demonstrated that greenhouse gas emissions from the project will be mitigated,” Friends of the River argued in a statement. “Rather, the Sites Project Authority has undercalculated its greenhouse gas emissions and therefore any effort to mitigate its emissions will fall short.”

This how the group’s Policy Director, Keiko Mertz, explains it: “The Newsom Administration unfortunately jumped the gun by certifying the Sites Project for judicial streamlining. Sites does not pass the test as a 21st century water solution. It’s expensive, carbon intensive, and distracts from lasting and sustainable solutions for California water security.”

Gary Wockner of Tell The Dam Truth agrees. “The Sites Reservoir project will emit significant amounts of methane that will make climate change worse which will escalate the water supply chaos in California,” Wockner added. “Newsom should focus his executive power on water conservation and resiliency, not gutting regulations to further destroy California’s rivers.”

The certification by the Governor follows an official protest against the water rights application and petitions of the Sites Project Authority for the proposed Sites Reservoir filed on August 31 by Friend of the River and the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, along with a coalition of tribes and environmental organizations. That includes the Winnemem Wintu Tribe, AquAlliance, California Water Impact Network, CalWild, Fly Fishers of Davis, Friends of the Swainson’s Hawk, Northern California Council of Fly Fishers International, Restore the Delta, Save California Salmon and Water Climate Trust.

The protest lays out a “plethora of evidence” for the environmental harm that Sites Reservoir will cause, as well as the ways in which Sites Reservoir will not produce nearly as much water as advocates for the project hope it will: [Read the full protest HERE](#).

According to the protest, “Sites Reservoir’s negative environmental impact is the result of impaired timing, temperature and volume of flows in the Sacramento River and Delta, increased concentration of toxic metals, the formation of harmful algae blooms, and the [immense greenhouse gas emissions](#) Sites will create.”

The Governor’s action took place at a time when California salmon, steelhead and other fish populations and the San Francisco Bay-Delta ecosystem are in their worst crisis ever, according numerous surveys, studies and data points.

TOPICS: Sites [Reservoir Opposition](#)

<https://sacramento.newsreview.com/2023/11/15/environmentalists-blast-newsom-again-this-time-for-streamlining-sites-reservoir-in-the-sacramento-valley/>