

## Conservation and Fishing Groups Condemn Approval of Sites Reservoir EIR by Project Authority Board

by Dan Bacher

Community (This content is not subject to review by Daily Kos staff prior to publication.)

Friday, November 17, 2023 at 6:09:27p PST



Members of the Yurok and Hoopa Valley Tribes say, "No Water For Profit!!," at a rally to oppose the Delta Tunnel in Redding in March 2020. Fish advocates say the Delta Tunnel will be used in conjunction with Sites Reservoir to further enrich Big Ag oligarchs. Photo by Dan Bacher.

SACRAMENTO, CA – Regulatory capture by Big Ag and Big Water is a sad fact of life in the “green” and “progressive” state of California.

That’s why the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) under the Newsom Administration has promoted the environmentally destructive Delta Tunnel project and “voluntary agreements” — and why today members of the Sites Project Authority Board, comprised of representatives of the water agencies that will benefit from the project, voted unanimously to certify Sites’ Environmental Impact Report just two weeks after giving the public access to the documents.

After the vote, representatives of the Sites Project Board of Directors gushed about their unanimous decision to certify what environmental advocates call the “Sites Reservoir Boondoggle.”

“Over the last six years, we conducted one of the most comprehensive environmental analyses ever done for a water supply project to design a project that can meet the needs of California’s communities, farms, and environment,” claimed Fritz Durst, Chair of the Sites Project Authority Board of Directors. “Sites Reservoir is a new way of managing water designed to provide resiliency and reliability amid our changing climate.”

Durst represents Reclamation District No. 108, located along the western edge of the Sacramento River. The district delivers water to nearly 48,000 acres of farmland within southern Colusa County and northern Yolo County. RD 108 receives water from the Sacramento River under riparian water rights, licenses for appropriation of surface water, and a Settlement Contract with the US Bureau of Reclamation: [rd108.org/...](http://rd108.org/...)

“Sites Reservoir is truly a product of collaboration,” echoed Jerry Brown, Executive Director of the Sites Project Authority. “The Project would not be possible without the support of our participants and government partners, who all recognize the unique benefits of Sites Reservoir.

“During the multi-year environmental process, we also considered and incorporated feedback from a wide variety of stakeholders, and we have a better Project because of it. It’s allowed us to put forward a Project that is affordable, permissible, and buildable—one that will benefit all of California,” added Brown.

The Board argued that the construction of Sites would increase water supply throughout California and provide, for the first time, “environmental benefits by storing water specifically for the environment to support native wildlife and their habitat during drought periods.”

They also said the 1.5 million acre-foot, off-stream water storage project, located on the west side of the Sacramento Valley in Colusa and Glenn counties, “is being advanced to increase California’s water and climate resiliency while also protecting and enhancing the environment.”

However, a coalition of environmental organizations, including Friends of the River (FOR), Sierra Club and California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, strongly condemned this unanimous decision in a statement.

They also blasted the decision by the Newsom administration to use Senate Bill (SB) 149 to fast-track Sites despite the project’s [failure to meet statutory criteria of the SB 149](#) Infrastructure Streamlining Program.

“Unfortunately, this certification was a foregone conclusion,” the groups stated. “It comes as no surprise that the very beneficiaries of this environmental boondoggle would vote to certify the environmental documents and thus move one step closer to construction. However, it is a dangerous precedent set by the Newsom administration and these public agencies that a project like Sites, which has been shown numerous times to be harmful for the Delta, the climate crisis, and our water future, would be approved so hastily and without adequate time for public review.”

As a coalition, FOR and its allies argued that Sites is not a 21st-century solution for the following reasons:

- “Sites Reservoir will add less than 1% to the state’s water supply on average, but will allow project proponents to scalp water for profit during drought.
- Sites Reservoir will damage the Sacramento River and Bay-Delta ecosystems by taking water even during the driest years.
- Sites Reservoir [will emit approximately 362 million metric tons of CO2e or 362,000 metric tons of CO2e/year](#). That is the equivalent of 80,000 gasoline-powered passenger vehicles per year.
- Sites Reservoir is a continuation of the same poor water management strategies that have caused the water crisis, and harmed Californians and disadvantaged communities. [We have better alternatives](#).
- Sites will not prioritize water for ecological benefits. Instead, each investor is allowed to manage their own storage space independently, with the State of California’s block of environmental water given uniform treatment.”

In response to today’s approval, Keiko Mertz, Policy Director for Friends of the River (FOR), stated, “Despite the appearance of unanimity and kind words about teamwork and environmental benefits in today’s meeting, the environmental community continues to oppose the Sites Reservoir project due to countless harms. The project is an expensive boondoggle that won’t provide net environmental benefits or meaningful increases in water supply. While today’s vote was never in question, it is still disappointing to see this project escape public scrutiny at every turn.”

Chris Shutes, Executive Director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance (CSPA) also blasted the approval of the project.

“The Sites Project will kill more fish faster. It’s a water supply slush fund to sustain over-diversion of water. The only modern element is the deceptive environmental branding,” he stated.

“Building new dams and reservoirs at the expense of healthy watersheds is not a modern solution to California’s water resilience challenges,” noted Sierra Club Senior Policy Strategist Erin Wooley. “Restoring the San Francisco Bay-Delta must include restoration of in-stream flows to support recovery of native fish and wildlife, and protect water quality for local communities. Sites Reservoir is an expensive and

environmentally destructive proposal whose cost will be paid by taxpayers, water users in Southern California and the species the project claims to benefit."

The coalition members vowed that they "will continue to work together to stop the environmentally destructive Sites Reservoir Project and offer sustainable solutions for California's water future."

The approval of the project couldn't come at a worse time for California fish populations and the San Francisco Bay-Delta ecosystem. Recreational and commercial salmon fishing is banned in the ocean waters of California and most of Oregon, while recreational salmon fishing is closed in all of the state's rivers, due to the collapse of Sacramento River and Klamath/Trinity River fall-run Chinook populations. The Hoopa Valley Tribe on the Trinity River and the Yurok Tribe on the Klamath River are limited to a very small allocation of fish.

Meanwhile, Sacramento River winter-run Chinook and spring-run Chinook populations continue to move closer and closer to extinction while the Delta smelt, once the most abundant fish in the entire estuary, has become virtually extinct in the wild. The CDFW's fall midwater trawl survey has found no Delta smelt in five years. Massive water exports from the Delta to agribusiness and Southern California water agencies lead the list of factors that have caused this fish population crash.

The Sites Authority Board of Directors, Associate Members and Reservoir Committee Representatives represent a who's who of water agencies in California — and a classic example of regulatory capture by Big Ag and Big Water. They include the following representatives of water contractors that would benefit from the project:

#### **Sites Authority Board Directors**

Fritz Durst, Chair, Reclamation District 108

Grey Allen, Placer County Water Agency/City of Roseville

Logan Dennis, Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District

Gary Evans, Colusa County

Kerry Schmitz, City of Sacramento/Sacramento County Water Agency

Joe Marsh, Colusa County Water District

Thomas Arnold, Glenn County

Doug Parker, Westside Water District

Jeff Sutton, Vice-Chair, Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority

Don Bader – U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Cost-Share Partner, Non-Voting)

Rob Cooke – CA Department of Water Resources (Ex-Officio, Non-Voting)

#### **Associate Members**

Greg Johnson, Western Canal Water District

#### **Reservoir Committee Representatives**

Jason Holley, City of American Canyon

Matt Knudson, Antelope Valley – East Kern Water Agency

Greg Krzys, Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District  
Lance Eckhart, San Geronio Pass Water Agency  
Jamie Traynham, Treasurer, Davis Water District  
Mike Azevedo, Vice-Chair, Colusa County  
Robert Cheng, Coachella Valley Water District  
Zach Dennis, LaGrande Water District  
Valerie Pryor, Chair, Zone 7 Water Agency  
Cindy Kao, Santa Clara Valley Water District  
Mark Krause, Desert Water Agency  
Robert Kunde, Wheeler Ridge-Maricopa Water Storage District  
Steve Cole, Santa Clarita Valley Water District  
Shelly Murphy, Colusa County Water District  
Allen Myers, Westside Water District  
Randall Neudeck, Metropolitan Water District  
Jim Peterson, Cortina Water District  
Bob Tincher, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District  
Bill Vanderwaal, Reclamation District 108 and Dunnigan Water District  
Trent Taylor, Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water Storage District  
Paul Weghorst, Irvine Ranch Water District

For more information on the Sites Reservoir boondoggle, visit:

<https://www.friendsoftheriver.org/our-work/rivers-under-threat/sacramento-threat-sites/>

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