



Capitol Alert

## Deep Disappointment: Global climate envoy Newsom is alienating environmentalists at home

By Ari Plachta

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Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks during a press conference Friday, March 24, 2023, at a farm in Dunnigan where fields are being flooded to recharge the groundwater basin. Newsom ended some of California's water restrictions because state reservoirs have been replenished by a series of atmospheric river storms after three years of drought. PAUL KITAGAKI JR. pkitagaki@sacbee.com

Gov. Gavin Newsom has been positioning himself as a global climate leader this year, evangelizing California environmentalism in China and at the United Nations. But at home, he is increasingly at loggerheads with leading environmentalists.

Environmental groups and tribes say the governor's plan to protect water supply from climate change will exacerbate existing ecological devastation and irreversibly damage the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the central hub of the state's water system.

While this relationship has been fraying for years, a new fault line opened this month when Newsom used newfound authority to [fast track](#) approval for the largest proposed piece of concrete water infrastructure to be built by the state in decades.

“We were expecting a very different administration. He was an extremely environmentally focused mayor in San Francisco and we were expecting something similar,” said Barry Nelson, a longtime analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council now representing the Golden State Salmon Association.

The Bee talked to nearly a dozen leading advocates and experts on California water. Many give credit to Newsom on other issues, but share the belief that his water policies fall short of their expectations.

Questions put to the governor’s office on water strategy were referred to Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot. He said the administration has aimed to break from traditional conflict-ridden water policy debates, but disagreement is inevitable. He also highlighted Newsom’s support for dam removal on the [Klamath](#) and [Eel](#) rivers.

“While we want to bring everybody along, we have a responsibility to ensure that we have water supplies for Californians,” Crowfoot said. “At the end of the day, we have to provide a balanced approach and that’s what we’re doing.”

Environmentalists are acutely concerned with the beleaguered delta, a massive estuary that draws together California’s major rivers and feeds giant pumps that ship water south to cities and farms.

Newsom’s sweeping 2022 [water strategy](#), which includes programs such as safe drinking water to communities and water recycling, has sparked specific criticism for his support for three major proposals related to the Bay-Delta watershed and Sacramento Valley.

Those proposals: Negotiated agreements with major water agencies to relinquish supplies voluntarily, instead of regulations for minimum flows [through the delta](#); a controversial proposal to build a [tunnel](#) to transport water from the Sacramento river beneath the delta; and the plan to build [Sites Reservoir](#) in a valley north of Sacramento.

In the governor’s framing, his approach is meant to address the strains of climate change on water supply. But environmental advocates warn his plan won’t protect the delta’s deteriorating ecosystem or ensure that a sufficient amount of water pass through, threatening disaster for the local farming economy, Native American communities and threatened and endangered fish - from [salmon](#) and [steelhead](#) to [green sturgeon](#) and delta smelt.

Opposition to Newsom’s tunnel project among state lawmakers [almost tanked](#) a budget deal last summer when he tried unsuccessfully to include it in a last-minute infrastructure law, [SB 249](#). The law allows the governor to pick projects for judicial streamlining. Environmental challenges in court have to be limited to 270 days.

Groups such as Friends of the River, Tell the Dam Truth and Patagonia also urged against Newsom’s selection of Sites Reservoir for streamlining under the law, citing research that decomposing organic matter underneath the reservoir could also emit

362,000 metric tons of methane emissions despite the project's branding as "green infrastructure."

"Do we need a really expensive new reservoir that won't provide very much water and has all these negative impacts?" asked Keiko Mertz, policy director for Friends of the River. "The answer is clearly no. We should be saving taxpayer dollars."

## FEINSTEIN ON STEROIDS?

Several leading environmental advocates said the Newsom administration has turned a deaf ear to groups representing communities and stakeholders that would face negative impacts from the proposed "[voluntary agreements](#)," as well as Sites and delta tunnel projects.

Barry Nelson, the former NRDC analyst, compared Newsom's strategy on California water supply to that of late California senator Dianne Feinstein, who developed a [reputation](#) for closely aligning with Central Valley farmers.

"Newsom's strategy is the Feinstein strategy on steroids," Nelson said. "One of her staffers once said to me, 'The senator is going to earn her environmental credibility on forestry and desert issues and offshore oil, but her water policies would reflect the desire of Central Valley agriculture.'"

Natural Resources Secretary Crowfoot called the notion "wholly inaccurate," citing a \$300 million-a-year commitment made by Newsom in his first year in office to safe drinking water for low-income communities in the Central Valley.

"We have to adjust our system for climate change," Crowfoot said. "At the end of the day, there are groups and leaders on all sides of California water that will criticize a balanced approach, but it's not going to change our focus."

For its part, Sites Reservoir has completed the environmental review process and must receive a water right from the State Water Resources Control Board before moving forward. That public hearing is expected next year.

Andrew Rypel, a fisheries biologist and sturgeon expert at UC Davis, said celebrating dams coming down on the Eel River one week and celebrating the construction of Sites Reservoir the next is a strategy riddled with mixed messages.

"Is Sites going to result in more or less water being exported from the river? I think the answer is more," Rypel said. "And is that going to help or hurt native fish? Probably hurt them."

Last month, the water board laid out long-awaited options for new water quality standards in the delta that included Newsom's voluntary agreements proposal, which a coalition of statewide water agencies [support](#).

Jerry Brown, executive director of the quasi-governmental agency Sites Project Authority, said around 17% of storage within the reservoir will be dedicated for environmental purposes including distributing flow through the Yolo bypass and other nature reserves.

“Any water supply project has pluses and minuses,” Brown said. “Is there going to be water to fill this storage project? All of the research that I’ve reviewed says yes there will be.”

## ‘DISAPPOINTMENT’ WITH THE MASTER PLAN

Back in 2020, executive director of Restore the Delta Barbara Barrigan-Parilla said she had plans to meet with Secretary Crowfoot but soon stopped hearing from the Newsom administration on issues impacting delta farmers, residents and tribal communities.

“I have the deepest disappointment on water issues in Governor Newsom, probably more than with any other governor,” she said. “Governor Newsom and his team came in and promised one thing and have delivered something completely different. They have cut out the delta community in every way, shape and form.”

She warned that moving ahead with the voluntary agreements, building Sites, and building the tunnel would mean loss of the delta - the largest estuary on the North American west coast, one of the most agriculturally productive regions in the U.S. and a culturally significant place for indigenous Californians for thousands of years.

“I sit here and wonder, ‘Does he really think he has to deliver this bad plan so that he looks like he’s building infrastructure or problem solving for a presidential run?’” Barrigan-Parilla said. “I find that deeply troublesome because I don’t know how much of it is really a commitment to the idea that this is the best path forward for water management.”

The debate over Sites, the tunnels and Bay-Delta plan also coincides with a civil rights investigation by the federal Environmental Protection Agency after tribes and environmental justice groups accused the state water board of discrimination and mismanagement that have contributed to the delta’s ecological deterioration.

“The State Water Board really shouldn’t be proceeding with approving any of these major infrastructure projects until the water quality standards in the delta are sufficiently updated,” said Stephanie Safdi, an attorney who filed the complaint and lecturer at Stanford Law. “They set the amount of flow needed to create a sustainable ecosystem that’s also going to support thriving tribes.”

The water board is holding meetings and workshops on the [Bay-Delta Plan](#), and will post future water rights hearing information on the [Sites Reservoir](#) project.

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*Ari Plachta is a climate reporter for The Sacramento Bee. She joined the newsroom after reporting on water for the Los Angeles Times, schools for the LA Daily News and politics as a freelancer in Israel-Palestine. Born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, she is a graduate of UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy.*

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