



Gavin Newsom fast-tracks plan to build California's first new reservoir in decades

By Ari Plachta

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Gov. Gavin Newsom put a long-debated water storage project north of Sacramento on the fast track for approval Monday, using his power under new infrastructure laws to accelerate development and reduce regulatory hurdles.

The proposed \$4.5 billion Sites Reservoir on ranch lands in Glenn and Colusa counties would be California's first major reservoir in nearly 50 years. It is designed to capture more water from the Sacramento River during wet years for use when drought hits.

"We're cutting red tape to build more faster," Newsom said in a written statement. "These are projects that will address our state's biggest challenges, 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."

Supporters of the reservoir have long promoted the project as a way to boost water storage amid increasingly unpredictable climate swings. It can hold up to 1.5 million acre-feet of water — enough to supply 3 million households annually — for farms and cities across the state.

While the project would not impact the river's currents directly, critics have long warned that the project would remove much-needed water for fish habitat and represents a loss for other wildlife and natural landscapes along the river.

To take advantage of billions of dollars in new federal infrastructure funding, the governor pushed his infrastructure package through during the legislature over the summer. Signed by Newsom in July, it is meant to streamline permitting and limit the duration of environmental challenges in court.

Under Senate Bill 149, one of the package's measures, courts are required to resolve legal challenges to projects under California's Environmental Quality Act within 270 days. The measure could prevent months or even years of delay, Newsom has said.

Late last week, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and California's Sites Project Authority released their final environmental reviews. The environmental impact report and statements may face legal challenges and are crucial for future permitting, including securing a water right from the State Water Resources Control Board.

It is projected to cost \$4.4 billion, with money from Proposition 1 — passed by voters in 2014 — covering up to \$875 million and \$233.7 million in federal funding from last year's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Water agencies slated to benefit from the reservoir will fund the rest, including Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

Project managers have said they hope to begin construction for Sites Reservoir reservoir in 2026 and finish in 2032.

Environmental groups have long opposed the new reservoir and objected to a shorter judicial review, saying the project will release unacceptable amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas, into the air in addition to other adverse impacts.

“If the State of California does not set limits on water use, and instead allows the state and federal projects to keep taking, taking, taking, the state is going to run out of fish and living rivers,” wrote an opposition letter signed by groups such as the Sierra Club and Water Climate Trust.

An initial version of the governor's infrastructure package included a provision for the far more controversial Delta Conveyance project, 45-mile tunnel that would pull water from the Sacramento River and pipe it underneath the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, for a similar fast track.

Newsom's last-minute policy tactics prompted frustration from lawmakers, who passed the legislation after the Delta Conveyance was removed.

Video Link:

<https://www.sacbee.com/news/california/water-and-drought/article252814238.html>

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