

Pacific Flyway birds are counting on California to honor voters and build Sites Reservoir



Stone Corral Creek in Sites, CA. This whole valley would be filled with water. Where photo was taken would be over 200 feet underwater.

Photo by Julie A. Hotz.

IN SUMMARY

The construction of Sites Reservoir would benefit millions of migratory birds that stop in the Central Valley on their journey along the Pacific Flyway.



GUEST COMMENTARY WRITTEN BY

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Lake Oroville and Shasta Lake are [filled to the brim](#), and the rivers of the Central Valley are roaring. Thanks to an exceptionally wet winter, for the first time in years,

farms and cities are receiving their full water supply because there's more than enough to meet the needs of people and the environment.

It's also the type of bountiful year that would fill Sites Reservoir, which would hold a critical backup supply of water for dry years. Sites would help sustain migratory bird habitats and add needed flexibility to California's overtaxed water-delivery system on which wildlife-friendly farming depends.

Unfortunately, the state's eighth-largest reservoir [remains a dream unfulfilled](#), [nearly a decade after voters approved](#) the \$7.1 billion Proposition 1 water bond that allocated hundreds of millions of dollars toward building Sites.

It's time for the reservoir to become a reality.

Gov. Gavin Newsom deserves recognition for wanting to speed up environmentally friendly infrastructure projects, [such as Sites](#). The California Legislature also has shown leadership by introducing bills that could make Sites happen soon. Now regulators at the State Water Resources Control Board need to quickly approve the [Sites Project Authority's application](#) to begin using water from the Sacramento River.

Conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited support Sites Reservoir because of the benefits it would provide to the millions of migratory birds that stop in the Central Valley on their journey along the Pacific Flyway. This water also could be spread on the landscape in the winter to provide food and a safe haven for young salmon.

Last fall was a prime example of why Sites is so needed. Due to drought, California's few remaining Central Valley wetlands suffered from limited water, [depriving birds of important habitat when they needed it most](#). These lands, many of them public, also provide important year-round habitat for imperiled species such as the tri-colored blackbird and the giant garter snake.

At the same time, only about half of the 500,000 acres of rice that is normally planted in the Sacramento Valley received water last year. Rice fields enrich the biodiversity of the region by providing habitat for more than 225 different species, and they are extremely important for the Pacific Flyway's waterfowl.

When flooded for the winter, rice fields serve as surrogate floodplain habitat, and they provide an important food source for ducks, geese and swans. It's not an exaggeration to say that California's Sacramento Valley rice farms are one of the main reasons why the West's waterfowl populations buck a troubling trend. Across the continent, [many types of birds have been on the decline](#).

But not waterfowl. We have rice and wetlands to thank for that in California.

Yes, this exceptionally wet winter saved our birds, but we can't count on winters like that every year.

This is where Sites Reservoir comes in. Water would only be pumped from the Sacramento River into the Colusa County reservoir when flows are high, as they are this year, and at times when state regulators deem there is minimal risk to fish populations. The water stored in the reservoir could then be saved for environmental uses when it's needed most. This would ease the pressure on other water sources in times of drought.

Now is the time to get the job done and fulfill the voters' wishes. California needs to break ground on Sites Reservoir.

The birds of our Pacific Flyway are counting on us.

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