

COMMENTARY

Sites Reservoir project is not the water solution California needs

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Stone Corral Creek is the proposed location of the Sites Reservoir in Sites on Feb. 14, 2023. Photo by Julie A. Hotz for CalMatters

IN SUMMARY

Sites Reservoir is the latest in a long line of proposed dams promising to address California's cycle of water insecurity. Some conservation groups say it will fail to make much of a difference, and will only damage a vulnerable water ecosystem.

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California is at yet another critical point in its struggle toward a sustainable water future, and yet we're still talking about the wrong solutions.

On Wednesday, the water rights protest period for Sites Reservoir [will come to a close](#).

[Sites Reservoir](#) is the latest in a long line of proposed dams promising to end our cycle of water insecurity. However, Sites won't add much to California's water portfolio, and its harm to the Sacramento River, Delta ecosystem and communities that rely on them could be irreversible and ongoing.

[Many lamented](#) during this unusually wet year that water was “wasted to sea,” and that more dams could have captured enough water to solve California's ongoing water uncertainty. But water that flows to sea is essential [for many uses](#), including salinity control for farming, wastewater treatment and aiding endangered species.

If the Delta ceased to deposit water into the San Francisco Bay, ocean water would further flow into the Delta, [making the Delta's water unusable for farming and toxic for the wildlife](#) that depends upon it.

If constructed, Sites Reservoir would only expand overall water availability in California by less than 1% in an average good year, according to an analysis by Friends of the River. During long drought spells, it would not substantially improve the dire conditions in the Delta.

Proponents' own best estimates demonstrate that Sites would provide approximately 276,000 acre-feet of water annually – enough for just 3.9% of California's almonds or just 4% of urban water use, Friends of the River calculated. For such a small yield, beneficiaries would spend billions of taxpayer dollars, while a majority of project benefits are privatized.

Despite the promises that [Sites will deliver environmental benefits](#), many conservation groups remain opposed for one simple reason: taking more water from rivers will damage aquatic ecosystems. Although Sites has acquired funding for [waterfowl benefits](#), it was denied funding for a host of others. In fact, [the California Department of Fish and Wildlife critiqued many of these purported benefits](#), particularly around the impacts to certain species of salmon.

Throughout California's history, reservoir backers have always promised the world every time a new dam is built, and they always fail to deliver. The overall result of the 1,400 dams in California has been [salmon and other fish species declining towards extinction](#), the [loss of over 90% of California's wetlands](#), degraded water quality, and [expanding toxic algae blooms in the Bay and Delta](#).

California leaders cannot continue clinging to this outdated way of thinking.

Instead, we should be pursuing a suite of alternatives to dams - holistic reforms to individual, corporate and agricultural water use, while incentivizing less water-intensive crops, improving water management and efficiency, and recycling the roughly 400 billion gallons of treated water discarded into the Pacific Ocean each year. Groundwater recharge and demand management should also be part of the equation.

California has been locked in a century-long pattern. We use more water than we have, and the oft-proposed solutions sacrifice more of our natural habitat and waterways to quench an agricultural thirst that far outpaces capacity. At some point, we must accept that conservation is now cheaper and more equitable than more dams.

Most water years of the future will not be as generous as the past water year. Failing to acknowledge that is a form of climate denial. California must realistically evaluate how much water will be available in a shifting climate, and allocate it in an equitable way, while preserving environmental and economic values for generations to come.

Californians need enduring solutions, not more empty dams.

<https://calmatters.org/commentary/2023/08/sites-reservoir-dam-project-water/>