

# The Mercury News

## His job: Build the largest new reservoir in California in 50 years

**\$4.5 billion Sites project would be eighth largest reservoir in California, with groundbreaking planned for 2026**



Jerry Brown, executive director of the Sites Project Authority, visits ranchland near Maxwell, Calif., in rural Colusa County north of Sacramento, where the new \$4.5 billion Sites Reservoir is proposed for construction. (Photo: Sites Project Authority)

By [PAUL ROGERS](#) | [progers@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:progers@bayareanewsgroup.com) | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: December 17, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. | UPDATED: December 17, 2023 at 8:30 a.m.

California is no stranger to severe droughts. Eleven of the past 17 years have been in drought, with urban water shortages, barren farm fields, and a lack of water for fish and wildlife — the most recent ending just last winter when soaking rains finally returned.

As the state has struggled, and climate change has made droughts more severe, an increasing number of residents and political leaders have asked “Why don’t we build more dams to increase the water supply?”

A few have been built. Contra Costa Water District constructed Los Vaqueros Reservoir in 1998 and expanded it in 2012. Metropolitan Water District of Southern California built Diamond Valley Lake in Riverside County in 1999. San Diego County Water Authority raised the height of its San Vicente Dam by 117 feet in 2012.

But there have been no enormous new reservoirs built, like Shasta, Oroville and others were in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Experts cite many reasons. Most of the best spots are already taken. President Reagan changed the rules in the 1980s so that the federal government no longer pays 100% of the costs. Environmental laws passed in the 1970s — from the Endangered Species Act to the Clean Water Act — limit where and how projects can be built, and give opponents powerful tools to block them. Other sources of water, like recharging underground aquifers, recycling wastewater, and paying homeowners to voluntarily remove their lawns are often cheaper and less controversial. And when California voters passed Proposition 13 in 1978, they made it more difficult to raise taxes to fund projects like new dams.

Jerry Brown is working to overcome those odds. Brown, a civil engineer who isn't related to the former governor with the same name, is executive director of The Sites Project Authority, a group of government agencies in the Sacramento Valley that is planning to build the largest new reservoir in California since 1979, when the federal government built New Melones Lake in the Sierra Foothills west of Yosemite National Park.

Sites Reservoir would be a \$4.5 billion project, located in rural Colusa County, about 70 miles northeast of Sacramento. Plans call for it to be a vast off-stream reservoir that would take water from the Sacramento River in wet years, and store it for cities and farms in dry years. The 1.5 million-acre-foot reservoir would be California's eighth largest, providing water to 24 million people and 500,000 acres of Central Valley farmlands.

The project is opposed by the Sierra Club, Friends of the River and other environmental groups. It is supported by Gov. Gavin Newsom, farm organizations, labor unions and water districts, including the Santa Clara Valley Water District in San Jose, and the Metropolitan Water District in Los Angeles, both of which would receive some of the water.

On Nov. 17, the Sites Project Authority certified the final environmental impact report and approved the project. Brown says the group hopes to break ground in 2026.

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity and length.

**Q:** Why is this project needed?

**A:** Last winter was very wet. We estimate we would have been able to put about 700,000 acre feet of water (a one-year supply for about 3.5 million people) into Sites had it been built. We know the next drought is coming. We've just come out of a big drought. We definitely see the need to capture water when it's wet, and store it and serve it when it is dry. That's exactly what is necessary to make our system more resilient and our water supply more secure for the future.

**Q:** What about critics who say this project would deprive the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and San Francisco Bay of fresh water?

**A:** When you look at the amount of water that Sites would be permitted to divert during high flow periods — which is the only time diversion would be permitted — the amount that is being diverted is a very small share of the total.

We've reached a point in our development as a society where we make tradeoffs. And we have to make a tradeoff here. Where we may be losing something from that water making it all the way to the ocean, we are gaining far more by storing that water for dry years when all of us, including the environment, need it more.

**Q:** Of the \$4.5 billion cost for Sites, you have \$875 million committed in state money from Proposition 1, a \$2.2 billion loan from the Biden administration, and about \$244 million in federal funding from the bipartisan Infrastructure Law. I'm assuming most of the rest of the money would come from water rates from the agencies that partner with you?

**A:** Yes. We are also expecting to see more appropriation from the federal side. They have indicated they want to get up to about \$750 million. We are on track and in a good position for securing all the financing and moving forward.

**Q:** What is the biggest hurdle remaining?

**A:** Obtaining the water right from the State Water Resources Control Board. That's the biggest remaining issue in my view. That doesn't mean everything else is easy, or a piece of cake. But that one is probably the linchpin for this project actually getting done or not. We anticipate that getting done by the end of next year.

**Q:** How long before you break ground and get it built?

**A:** Assuming we have a water right by the end of next year, we will be ready to hire a contractor and break ground by early 2026. We need 2025 to get all of the water districts, and the state and federal governments, to make their final commitments to the funding and sign agreements. We have 22 water agencies that are participating and 15 on a waiting list. Our board just adopted a construction schedule that puts completion at the end of 2032.

**Q:** This project has been talked about for more than 60 years. What is the likelihood it will finally be built?

**A:** We've got a strong tailwind at our back right now, which is nice to see. It's rewarding for those who have been involved in this for so long. We still have a long way to go, but we do see the light at the end of the tunnel, and we see the path to get there.

---

## **Jerry Brown**

**Age:** 60

**Position:** Executive director, Sites Project Authority

**Hometown:** Salina, Kansas

**Residence:** Pleasanton

**Education:** B.A. in mechanical engineering from Cal State Northridge; Master's degree in civil engineering from USC; MBA from San Jose State University.

---

### **Five facts about Jerry Brown**

- He worked at the Contra Costa Water District as planning director and general manager from 2001 to 2019, overseeing the successful expansion of Los Vaqueros Reservoir
- He loves basketball and played on his high school team
- He is learning to play the guitar
- He drives a 1989 BMW nicknamed “the Time Machine”
- He is regularly confused with the former governor of the same name, and only just met Gov. Jerry Brown, who retired to a ranch in Colusa County, for the first time this summer

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2023/12/17/we-know-the-next-drought-is-coming-the-man-working-to-build-the-largest-new-reservoir-in-california-in-50-years>