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Push to build biggest California reservoir in decades hit with lawsuit

By Kurtis Alexander

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Kevin Spesert, with the Sites Project Authority, describes where one of the dams will be built for the proposed reservoir while standing at Funks Reservoir near the project site in August 2022.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

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A plan to build the [largest reservoir in California in decades](#), Sites Reservoir about 70 miles north of Sacramento, is being challenged as ecologically destructive and not worth the cost in a lawsuit filed by environmental groups Wednesday.

The \$4.5 billion project, which seeks to boost water supplies for [drought-plagued cities](#) and farms, was recently [put on the fast track](#) by [Gov. Gavin Newsom](#). The suit, though, alleges the reservoir's environmental impact report was insufficient, failing to address harm to fish and greenhouse gas emissions — problems opponents say make the additional water hard to justify.

California reservoir levels: [Charts show water supply across the state](#)

“It’s not a negligible amount of (water) storage that is provided, but it comes with a big cost,” said John Buse, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the organizations behind the suit. “There are other alternatives that were really not considered that might achieve some of the same benefits.”

While the legal challenge is a potential setback for the reservoir, Newsom’s streamlining of the proposal, under recently passed Senate Bill 149, was done to expedite legal challenges. The new law calls for the courts to resolve disputes under the California Environmental Quality Act within 270 days. The law was among several efforts by the governor to reduce red tape for infrastructure projects.

Sites Reservoir, planned in rural Colusa and Glenn counties, would be the state’s eighth biggest reservoir. Its water would be piped across the state, including to the Bay Area.

The facility is designed to capture water from the Sacramento River during wet years and store up to 1.5 million acre-feet for dry years, enough to meet the annual needs of more than 3 million households.

Unlike traditional reservoirs, Sites is planned as an “off-stream” facility, meaning water wouldn’t be stored directly on the river, thus avoiding having to dam the waterway and disturb flows for fish.

Still, critics have long noted that any water diverted from the Sacramento would mean less for wildlife and the natural habitat along the river. Many have wondered, in an age of increasing drought, whether there’s enough water to make the project worthwhile.

Joining the Center for Biological Diversity in the new lawsuit were Friends of the River, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, the California Water Impact Network and Save California Salmon. The complaint was filed in Yolo County Superior Court.

Even without the legal challenge, the reservoir faces obstacles, including closing the gap on funding and winning a water right to move forward with the diversions on the Sacramento River.

Building reservoirs in California hasn’t been easy because of the increasingly known environmental toll and because most of the good spots have been taken. The last

reservoir built with more than a million acre feet of capacity was New Melones Lake, about 45 miles east of Stockton, in the late 1970s.

The Sites Project Authority, the agency leading the project, hopes to break ground on Sites Reservoir in 2026 and complete construction by 2032.

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<https://www.sfchronicle.com/california/article/sites-reservoir-lawsuit-newsom-18566639.php>