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Lawsuit: Huge California Reservoir Proposal Threatens River, Climate, Fish

WOODLAND, Calif.— Conservation and environmental justice groups filed a [legal challenge](#) today to the largest reservoir project approved in California in decades. The Sites Reservoir would harm the Sacramento River ecosystem, threaten already imperiled fish species, and release greenhouse gas pollution, today's lawsuit says.

Sites would require the construction of several enormous dams and two 3,000-foot-long and 23-foot-wide tunnels. It will cost an estimated \$4.4 billion.

Proposed for a rural area about 80 miles northwest of Sacramento, the project would store about 1.5 million acre-feet of water, or nearly 490 billion gallons. To achieve this capacity, the reservoir would divert large quantities of water from the Sacramento River system, which is home to federally protected salmon and steelhead.

Most runs of Sacramento River salmon are imperiled and all are declining. Sites would reduce flows in the Sacramento River when salmon are migrating.

"The Sites Reservoir project will cause much environmental harm, which falls on the public, and a small amount of good, which primarily benefits the project investors," said Ron Stork, senior policy advocate at Friends of the River. "Among other harms, the reservoir will be a major greenhouse gas emitter. A recent [analysis](#) estimated that Sites would emit the equivalent of 80,000 gasoline-powered cars each year."

The lawsuit was filed in Yolo County Superior Court by Friends of the River, the Center for Biological Diversity, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, the California Water Impact Network and Save California Salmon. The suit challenges the Sites Project Authority, a state joint powers authority, for violating the California Environmental Quality Act in approving the reservoir.

"Diverting too much water will never solve the problem of giving away too much water," said Chris Shutes, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance. "But the only alternatives the Sites environmental report looked at were different ways to divert more water. To make a bad idea worse, the Sites report low-balled the required flow in the Sacramento River because a flow that protects fish would make the reservoir too expensive to build."

The Sites Reservoir project aims to capture large volumes of floodwaters from major storms and store them as a buffer against drought. But despite its expense and environmental harms, it will provide only a small water-supply benefit, increasing the state's storage capacity by about 3.5%.

"It's very difficult to justify the expense and environmental costs of big surface storage infrastructure projects, and the Sites Reservoir will cause far more harm than good," said John Buse, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Water storage undoubtedly provides some benefit, but we should be looking at cheaper alternatives that do more for people, rivers and fish."

Water evaporation from surface reservoirs can result in significant water loss, an effect that will only worsen with California's warming climate. Surface storage projects can also contribute to climate change by releasing methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Surface reservoirs can also impair water quality because the warmer water they impound can contribute to toxic algal blooms, which will also worsen with climate change.

“Sites is a very expensive boondoggle that is likely to produce toxic water,” said Carolee Krieger, executive director of the California Water Impact Network. “Do we really want another Kesterson? It’s not cost effective to throw money at a problem for such questionable and minimal actual water benefit.”

“Sites will perpetuate California’s antiquated and inequitable water distribution system to the detriment of Northern California Tribes, salmon and water quality,” said Regina Chichizola, executive director of Save California Salmon, a Tribally-led environmental justice organization. “It will promote the concentration of water and power in the hands of the few, and ignores Tribal rights and consultation. We have no choice but to challenge it in court.”

The groups are represented by the Law Office of Donald B. Mooney.

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