

Conservation Groups Sue Over Sites Reservoir Project

*By Adam Riquelmy, Courthouse News Service
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Sites, Colusa County. Photo by Tom Hilton.

A legal challenge was filed Wednesday in Yolo County Superior Court over one of California’s largest reservoir projects in decades.

Friends of the River, the Center for Biological Diversity, the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance, California Water Impact Network and Save California Salmon claim in [their suit](#) that the Sites Reservoir — about 80 miles northwest of Sacramento — will hurt the Sacramento River ecosystem. Additionally, they say the project will threaten fish and lead to greenhouse gas pollution.

“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, in a statement.

According to the suit, the project will include several dams, as well as two 3,000-foot-long and 23-foot-wide tunnels. It’s expected to cost \$4.4 billion.

[Governor Gavin Newsom’s office](#) has said the Sites Reservoir will hold up to 1.5 million acre-feet of water, enough for 3 million households for a year. It’s expected to increase Northern California’s water capacity by up to 15%, as well as cause ecosystem improvements and more recreational options.

The conservation and environmental groups suing over the project say the reservoir would divert water from the Sacramento River system, which holds salmon and steelhead.

“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, in a statement. “But the only alternatives the Sites environmental report looked at were different ways to divert more water.”

Newsom recently used a law he signed this past summer to fast-track the project. Senate Bill 149 requires courts to resolve challenges under the [California Environmental Quality Act](#) (CEQA) within 270 days, when possible. The move is meant to avoid months and years of delay.

Permitting and other approvals are set for late next year. Construction would start in 2025, and the reservoir would begin operations in 2030.

The environmental and conservation groups say they want a judge to determine the certification of the final environmental impact report and project approval are invalid, as the report didn't meet CEQA requirements.

According to the groups, the project seeks to capture large amounts of floodwater, storing them for when drought strikes. However, it will raise statewide storage capacity by only some 3.5%.

“Water storage undoubtedly provides some benefit, but we should be looking at cheaper alternatives that do more for people, rivers and fish,” said John Buse, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, in a statement.

A warming climate will worsen the significant loss of water from evaporation. Projects like the Sites Reservoir also can lead to more greenhouse gases, as it would release methane. Additionally, warmer water can impact toxic algal blooms, which will get worse 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, in a statement.

“It's not cost effective to throw money at a problem for such questionable and minimal actual water benefit,” she added.

Regina Chichizola — executive director of Save California Salmon, a tribal-led environmental justice organization — called the Sites project an “antiquated and inequitable water distribution system” that will hurt Northern California tribes, fish and water quality.

“We have no choice but to challenge it in court,” she said in a statement.

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