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Draft Water Rights Decision Highlights Flaws in Proposed Sites Reservoir Project

SACRAMENTO, CA – The draft water rights decision for the proposed Sites Reservoir project – released today by the Administrative Hearing Office of the State Water Resources Control Board – underscores longstanding concerns about the project’s environmental impacts, high costs, and limited benefits. The project, already estimated at roughly \$6.8 to 9 billion, would inundate thousands of acres of habitat and reduce flows that are critical to salmon and other species and critical to maintaining water quality downstream. In addition, it will produce relatively small amounts of water at high cost. The draft order includes a number of proposed permit terms to prevent or offset the project’s impacts on water quality, fisheries, and Tribal resources – impacts that Friends of the River and allied groups argued were far from fully accounted for.

“The draft water right decision clearly shows that the Board agrees with our position that the proposed reservoir will cause major water quality and environmental impacts that need to be addressed,” said Keiko Mertz, Policy Director at Friends of the River. “We appreciate that the Board is proposing to adopt some of our recommended safeguards, but important gaps in protection remain for some of the state’s most valuable resources. Sites water was already unaffordable—this reinforces that the project is a boondoggle that will worsen, not solve, California’s water affordability challenges.”

Friends of the River will work with its allies to prepare extensive comments identifying what is still needed to fully protect fish, water quality, and public trust resources. As the State Water Board considers final action, the organization urges decision-makers to carefully weigh whether investing billions in an increasingly costly and environmentally harmful project is a responsible path forward for California’s water future, when more economically efficient, climate resilient, and environmentally friendly alternatives are available.

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