

WATER SITES RESERVOIR: A NEW SOURCE OF WATER FOR REFUGES?

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More than 60 years in the making, the proposed Sites Reservoir – a new source of water for Sacramento Valley refuges – is coming closer to reality.

Sites Reservoir would not dam any existing river or stream; instead, up to 1.8 million acre feet of water would be pumped out of the Sacramento River during high flows and stored in an existing basin in the hills west of Maxwell.

Then, using the Tehama-Colusa and the Glenn-Colusa canals, as much as 500,000 acre feet of water from the reservoir could be used to supply farmers in the Sacramento Valley and refuges in the Sacramento National Wildlife Refuge Complex, or to improve water quality and meet endangered fish species' needs in the Delta.

If the reservoir had been in place this year, it could have stored over a million acre feet off the Sacramento River from January through April. Instead, most of that water flowed out to the ocean.

Sites Reservoir has been studied since 1957, but other sites for reservoirs were built first in the 1960s, and the environmental movement has blocked the building of any on- or off-stream reservoirs since then. For the past 20 years, Sites has been studied as a part of the CalFed process to achieve reliable water supply and ecosystem restoration across the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

But spurred by the worst drought on record, water districts in the Sacramento Valley have taken steps to ensure the

reservoir is built, forming a joint powers authority to secure funding and environmental permits, as well as finalizing planning and design. Once the authority has its funding and permits, construction will take about eight years. If all goes well, it could come on line in 10 to 12 years.

The reservoir site is on private ranches that would have to be acquired by eminent domain, but some of the ranchers are the most active proponents of the reservoir.

The general manager of the authority, Jim Watson, is a civil engineer with more than 30 years of experience managing large infrastructure projects. Watson is preparing a proposal to the California Water Commission asking the state to participate in the project. If the Water Commission gives the green light, the project could be eligible for funding under Proposition 1, a water bond that passed in November 2014.

Proposition 1 includes \$2.5 billion to pay for public benefits of water storage projects. The most studied and eligible projects in contention today are Sites Reservoir, Temperance Flat Reservoir on the Upper San Joaquin River above Fresno, raising Shasta Dam, and raising the Los Vaqueros Dam in Contra Costa County.

If sufficient public benefits could be shown, the state of California could provide up to 50 percent of the cost of building Sites Reservoir. The full cost of the construction of the reservoir is estimated to be \$4.4 billion. Potential public benefits include providing cold water for spawning salmon, including the endangered winter run, as well as providing fresh water to the Delta for the Delta smelt, a species of small fish on the verge of extinction.

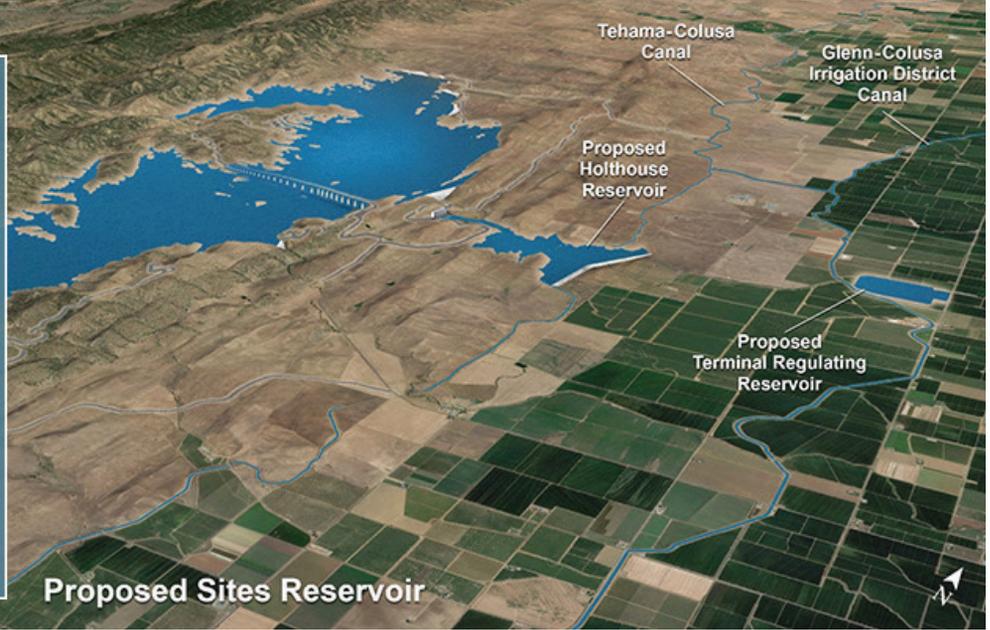
Another public benefit would be providing water to the Delta to hold back the salt water that naturally enters the Delta with the tides. Currently, this water has to come either from Shasta Lake, Folsom Lake or Lake Oroville. Sending water all the way from Shasta Lake takes several days, so having a reservoir so much closer to the Delta would be a great benefit. It would also take the pressure off of Folsom Lake, which primarily provides drinking water to the Sacramento metropolitan area and the Bay Area.

Having this “environmental” water available would benefit not only the general public of the state, but also the Central Valley farmers and Southern California cities whose water supplies are often interrupted by crises involving salt intrusion and Delta smelt population crashes. The reservoir could smooth out the fresh water supply to the Delta, increasing the reliability of water supplies below the Delta.

Of greatest interest to California Waterfowl is the potential for Sites Reservoir to provide water to the Sacramento

MEMBERS OF THE SITES RESERVOIR JOINT POWERS AUTHORITY

- Glenn-Colusa Water Irrigation District
- Reclamation District 108
- Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority
- Maxwell Irrigation District
- Glenn and Colusa counties
- Yolo County Flood and Water Conservation District
- Colusa County Water District
- Westside Water District
- Orland-Artois Water District
- Proberta Water District



Proposed Sites Reservoir

National Wildlife Refuge Complex. The federal Central Valley Project provides approximately two-thirds of the water needed by the refuge complex every year under the Central Valley Project Improvement Act.

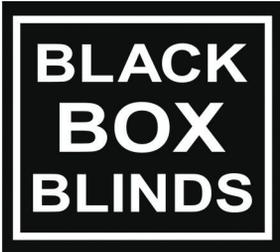
The remaining needs of the refuge complex are required to be filled from water purchased from other sources. Although the refuge complex is required to be fully supplied with its entire needs each year, this rarely happens. In fact, some parts of the complex, such as the Sutter National Wildlife Refuge, lack the infrastructure to receive even the minimum amount of water necessary to provide habitat for waterfowl and hunting opportunities for the public.

Having a dedicated supply of water in Sites Reservoir could allow the refuge complex to receive its full, legally required water supply in all but the driest years. The refuge managers and staff have done an amazing job of most effectively using the water they have available, but the shortage of water has deprived birds of habitat and reduced opportunity for hunters.

With this potential in mind, California Waterfowl has supported bi-partisan legislation introduced in Congress by Reps. John Garamendi (D-Walnut Grove) and Doug La Malfa (R-Oroville). The bill would require the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to speed up the feasibility study it is preparing on the reservoir project.

California Waterfowl has also requested a seat on an advisory committee that will be formed later this fall. For the joint powers authority, having California Waterfowl on the advisory committee would be an opportunity to work with a leader in wetlands conservation as well as an opportunity to reach out to the hunting community for support.

Information about the Sites Reservoir Project can be found at www.sitesjpa.net. The offices of Garamendi and LaMalfa and the member agencies of the Joint Powers Authority can also provide information about the project. 🦆



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