

**BAY AREA WATER SUPPLY AND CONSERVATION AGENCY
BOARD POLICY COMMITTEE MEETING**

February 6, 2026

Correspondence and media coverage of interest between January 23, 2026 and February 4, 2026

From: Restore Hetch Hetchy
To: Tom Smegal, CEO/General Manager, BAWSCA
and members of the BAWSCA Board of Directors
Date: January 2026
Subject: Request to Restore Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park

Press Release

From: No. California Water Association and the State Water Contractors
Date: January 31, 2026
Subject: Bay Delta Plan: Water managers highlight early successes of Healthy Rivers
Landscapes projects at State Water Board hearings

Water Supply Conditions:

Date: February 3, 2026
Source: SF Gate
Article: Historically warm, dry January erases snowpack gains in Sierra Nevada

Date: January 30, 2026
Source: San Francisco Chronicle
Article: California isn't getting enough snow. Here's what it means for water supplies

Water Policy:

Date: February 4, 2026
Source: San Francisco Chronicle
Article: A long-awaited California water policy promises balance. Opponents call it an
'extinction plan'

Date: February 3, 2026
Source: Sacramento Bee
Article: How to best protect the Delta? California water agencies advocates for flexibility

Date: January 30, 2026
Source: Sacramento Bee
Article: Bay-Delta water plan divides tribes, farmers and regulators

Water Supply Management:

Date: February 4, 2026
Source: Maven's Notebook
Article: Building California's water future: DWR's framework for the 2028 Water Plan
and SB 72 implementation

Water Supply Management, cont'd.:

Date: January 28, 2026
Source: Department of Water Resources
Article: How the State Water Project used Adaptive Management to Capture More Water During Recent Storms

Date: January 28, 2026
Source: Politico
Article: Trump is winning his water tug-of-war with Newsom

Water Infrastructure:

Date: January 23, 2026
Source: San Francisco Chronicle
Article: Trump administration signs off on plan for California's biggest reservoir in decades

Technology:

Date: January 26, 2026
Source: Public Policy Institute
Article: Artificial Intelligence and California's Water

January 2026

CEO & GM Thomas Smegal
Bay Area Water Supply and Conservation Agency

Re: Request to Restore Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park

Dear CEO & GM Smegal,

We write to respectfully request your leadership and support for restoring Yosemite National Park's Hetch Hetchy Valley to its original splendor, while ensuring continued, reliable, and undiminished use of water from the Tuolumne River for all customers of the San Francisco Regional Water System.

Yosemite Valley was first protected in 1864, when President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Grant—an unprecedented act that launched the American conservation movement. Naturalist John Muir later led the effort to expand those protections, resulting in the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890. His vision included Hetch Hetchy Valley and the high-country watersheds of the Tuolumne and Merced Rivers. Muir described Hetch Hetchy as "one of Nature's rarest and most precious mountain temples.", a place of extraordinary beauty worthy of preservation for all humanity.

In 1913, in spite of nationwide opposition, Congress passed the Raker Act, authorizing the City of San Francisco to construct the O'Shaughnessy Dam and related facilities, flooding Hetch Hetchy Valley. This remains the only instance in American history in which a city has been permitted to develop major infrastructure within a national park. No such project would be considered, let alone authorized, today.

We fully recognize the essential role dams play in supporting cities, agriculture, and water security throughout the American West. For more than a century, Hetch Hetchy Reservoir has served as a component of San Francisco's Regional Water System. That system, however, includes eight additional reservoirs, including Cherry Lake in the upper Tuolumne watershed. Multiple studies demonstrate that San Francisco's water and power systems can be improved and modernized in ways that would eliminate the need for the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir—making restoration of the valley possible.

Importantly, San Francisco's total system demand has declined by 19 percent over the past two decades. As a result, even without relying on Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, San Francisco could meet its full water needs by connecting Cherry Lake to its existing conveyance system. Under this approach, the system would retain more than two years of water storage, even during periods of historic drought. (See *Restoring Hetch Hetchy: The Cherry Solution.*)

Simply put, Hetch Hetchy Reservoir is no longer essential for providing a reliable water supply to San Francisco and its customers. The valley can be restored. San Francisco can continue receiving all the water it needs. No other water agencies dependent on the Tuolumne River would be affected in any way.

CEO & GM Thomas Smegal

Re: Request for Support to Restore Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park

January 2026

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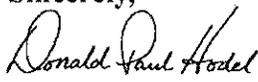
We therefore ask San Francisco to relinquish use of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and allow for the restoration of Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley, while ensuring continued operation of the City's other facilities within the Tuolumne River watershed. We further suggest that San Francisco work collaboratively with federal agencies to plan and to guide the restoration process, and to establish a funding mechanism through which public and private contributions can be collected and coordinated to help cover restoration costs.

Restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley represents an exceptional opportunity to reconcile infrastructure and conservation. It is a chance not only to restore a treasure in Yosemite National Park, but also to offer the world a powerful example of what thoughtful stewardship, innovation, and shared purpose can achieve. We can meet the needs of today while expanding the natural legacy of our national parks for generations to come.

We look forward to working with you on this unique opportunity. Please contact us at restoration@hetchhetchy.org to discuss next steps.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

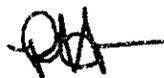
Sincerely,



Donald P. Hodel



Lois Wolk



Robert Hanna



Spreck Rosekrans

Donald P. Hodel served as U.S. Secretary of Energy and Secretary of the Interior under President Ronald Reagan. In 1987, he proposed that DOI, with cooperation from others, study whether or not Hetch Hetchy Valley could be restored while preserving the water benefits of San Francisco. The Bureau of Reclamation quickly replied that it could be done. Don asserts "there is no opportunity like this anywhere in the world—to add another Yosemite Valley to our great National Park System."

Lois Wolk served as a Member of the California State Assembly and State Senate from 2002 to 2016. In 2004, she co-authored a letter to Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger urging the State to explore restoring Hetch Hetchy Valley while ensuring no loss of water or power—an effort that led to California's formal study on the feasibility of restoration.

Robert Hanna is a public-lands advocate whose work has shaped state and national conservation efforts. He is the great-great-grandson of John Muir.

Spreck Rosekrans is Executive Director of Restore Hetch Hetchy, a nonprofit dedicated to returning Hetch Hetchy Valley to its natural state while safeguarding the water and power needs of all Tuolumne River communities.

Restoring Hetch Hetchy

The Cherry Solution



Providing Public Access to

HETCH HETCHY VALLEY

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

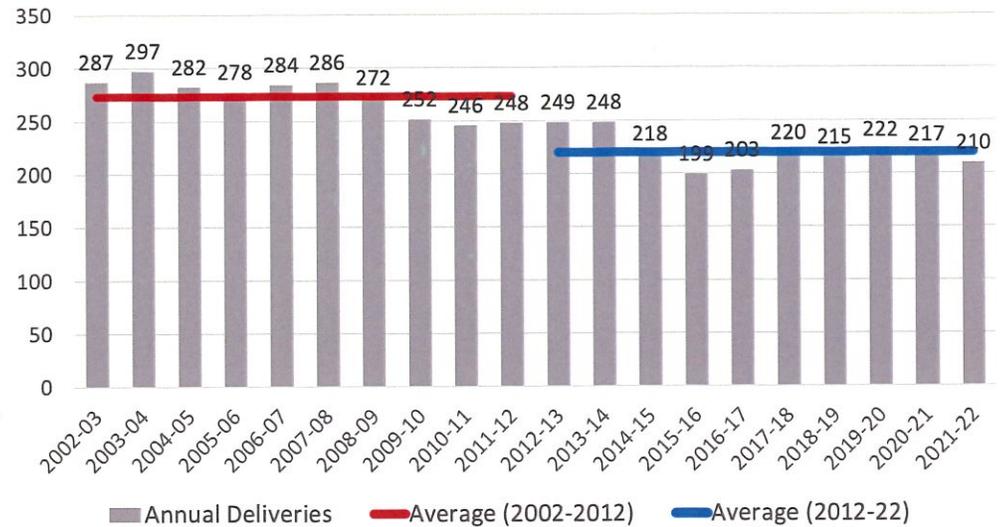
January 2026

Total water use within the San Francisco Regional Water System has declined sharply during the 21st century.

From 2002-2012, water deliveries averaged 273 TAF per year. That average dropped to 220 TAF per year from 2012-2022 — a decline of:

19%

FIGURE 2: San Francisco Regional Water System Total Water Deliveries (2002-2022)
(THOUSAND ACRE-FEET)



SOURCE: San Francisco Public Utilities Commission Alternative Water Supply Plan, February 2024

EVALUATION METHOD: THE TREWSSIM MODEL

The TREWSSIM (Tuolumne River Equivalent Water Supply Simulation) model¹ was used to assess system performance without Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and with the addition of a **Cherry Intertie**,² which would allow water stored in Cherry Reservoir to be diverted directly to the Bay Area.

Two scenarios were compared:

- 1. Current Operations** — The system as currently operated using Hetch Hetchy Reservoir to meet a demand of 220 TAF, plus a prospective 15 TAF instream flow requirement below Don Pedro.³
- 2. Cherry Solution** — A reconfigured system without Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. Natural Tuolumne River flows would be diverted at the outlet of Hetch Hetchy Valley. When natural flows are insufficient, water stored in Cherry Reservoir would supplement supplies through the Cherry Intertie.

Cherry Reservoir (pictured on the right) sits at 4700' elevation in the Sierra Nevada. It is connected by tunnel to nearby Lake Eleanor and the two are generally operated as a single storage

unit. Cherry Reservoir is not presently connected to the pipelines which deliver Tuolumne River supplies to the Bay Area.



Cherry Reservoir (above) lies just outside Yosemite National Park.

¹ The TREWSSIM (Tuolumne River Equivalent Water Supply Simulation) Model is based on detailed information provided by output from the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission's HHSM-LSM model. Originally developed by the Environmental Defense Fund for *Paradise Regained: Solutions for Restoring Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley* (2004), TREWSSIM was modified to examine the *Cherry Solution* scenario. Detailed modeling results are posted online at <https://hetchhetchy.org/the-cherry-solution/>.

² An Intertie connecting San Francisco's Holm Powerplant to its Early Intake was proposed in Hetch Hetchy Water and Power: Systemwide Power Study, Sverdrup & Parcel and Associates, et al., 1981, although its purpose was to increase hydropower production, not to allow for Hetch Hetchy Valley to be restored.

³ Under present Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (1996) regulations, the Turlock and Modesto Irrigation Districts are required to provide an average of 217 TAF to protect fish in the lower Tuolumne River. This amount is expected to be increased to 245 TAF under the "**Voluntary Agreement**" negotiated by multiple parties in response to the California State Water Resource Control Board's Bay-Delta Plan. San Francisco is expected to be responsible for meeting 51.7% of this increase — an average 15 TAF per year. Advocates for the downstream fishery continue to make a strong case for additional flow requirements, which would increase demands on the SFRWS.

Comparing Scenarios: CURRENT OPERATIONS VS. THE CHERRY SOLUTION

Under the **Current Operations** scenario, an average of 192 TAF is diverted from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir to the Bay Area. These diversions, combined with 28 TAF from local watersheds, provide a total of 220 TAF to customers in San Francisco and other cities.

The majority of water released from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir (537 TAF), as well as all releases from Cherry Reservoir (428 TAF), flow downstream through pipelines or river channels, to Don Pedro Reservoir. These releases generate hydropower, sustain fisheries, provide flows for whitewater recreation and meet water rights obligations to the Turlock and Modesto Irrigation Districts.

Under the **Cherry Solution** scenario, the natural flow of the Tuolumne River would be diverted as it leaves Hetch Hetchy Valley using a small water diversion facility at the mouth of the Valley.⁴ When the natural flow of the Tuolumne is insufficient to meet demand, typically in late summer and fall, releases from Cherry Reservoir would be diverted through the new Cherry Intertie.

On average, under the **Cherry Solution** scenario, 122 TAF per year of Tuolumne River flow would be diverted to the Bay Area after it passes through Hetch Hetchy Valley. Releases from Cherry Reservoir, an average of 70 TAF per year, would make up the difference. Again, these diversions, combined with 28 TAF from local watersheds, provide a total of 220 TAF to customers in San Francisco and other cities.

Under the **Cherry Solution** scenario, total diversions to the Bay Area would be the same, and there would be a very small increase in total flows into Don Pedro Reservoir, reflecting the absence of evaporative losses at Hetch Hetchy Reservoir. (See tables 1 and 2).

Table 3 provides an average breakdown comparing, by month, when the natural flow of the Tuolumne River would be available to when releases from Cherry Reservoir would be required. Natural flows would provide the majority of overall supply and the Cherry Intertie would seldom if ever be used during spring snowmelt months March through June. The Cherry Intertie would be the primary mechanism for diverting Tuolumne River water supplies to the Bay Area during late summer and fall months.

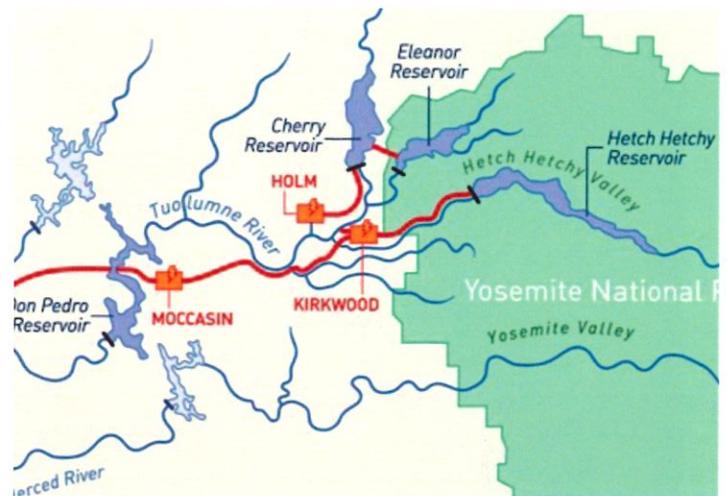


Table 1: Current Operations Scenario (Annual Average in TAF)

	To Bay Area	To Don Pedro
From Hetch Hetchy	192	537
From Cherry Reservoir	0	428
Total	192	965

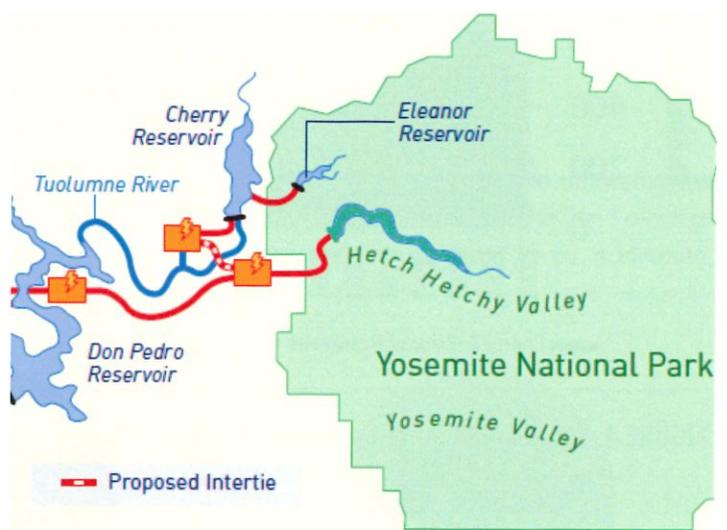


Table 2: Cherry Solution Scenario (Annual Average in TAF)

	To Bay Area	To Don Pedro
From Hetch Hetchy	122	612
From Cherry Reservoir	70	358
Total	192	970

Table 3: Monthly Average Distribution of Tuolumne River Diversions under Cherry Solution Scenario

	Month	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Annual
Source: River Flow via Hetch Hetchy Valley		3	5	5	4	4	13	21	19	23	16	7	2	122
Source: Storage Release from Cherry Reservoir		14	7	6	4	2	0	0	0	0	4	14	19	70

⁴ This diversion facility, a new Canyon Tunnel intake, and a Cherry Intertie are both included in Hetch Hetchy Restoration Study, California Natural Resources Agency, 2006.

STORAGE AND RELIABILITY

Without Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, San Francisco would retain 1,100 TAF of storage capacity — five times annual demand.

During dry years and multi-year droughts, end-of-year storage would decline but remain substantial. Minimum projected end-of-year storage is 459 TAF, more than twice annual demand, even after the severe droughts matching those which ended in 1977 and 1992. The system would remain highly reliable.

If San Francisco chooses to further increase resilience, it could pursue measures other agencies have already implemented, including groundwater recharge, local surface storage, aggressive conservation, and water recycling — investments which, collectively, would replace Hetch Hetchy Reservoir **15 times over**.⁵



*The Tuolumne River below Hetch Hetchy is a favorite of adventurous rafters and kayakers. The **Cherry Solution** scenario assumes San Francisco would continue to provide managed summertime dam releases for whitewater recreation.*

FIGURE 3: Total San Francisco Regional Water System Storage under Cherry Solution scenario

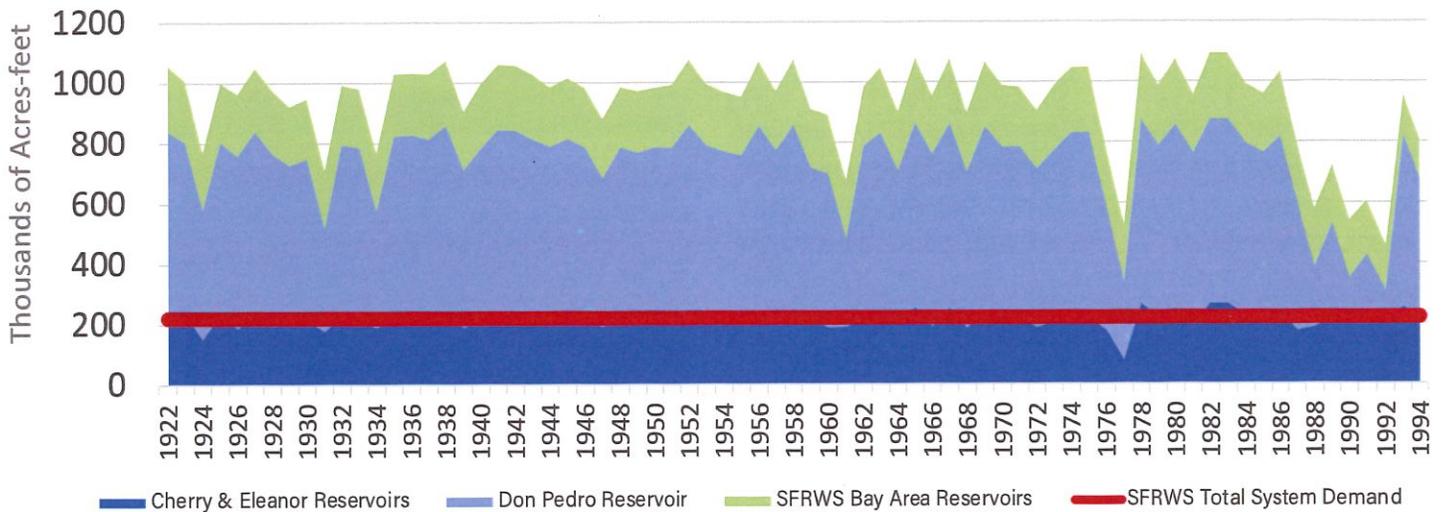
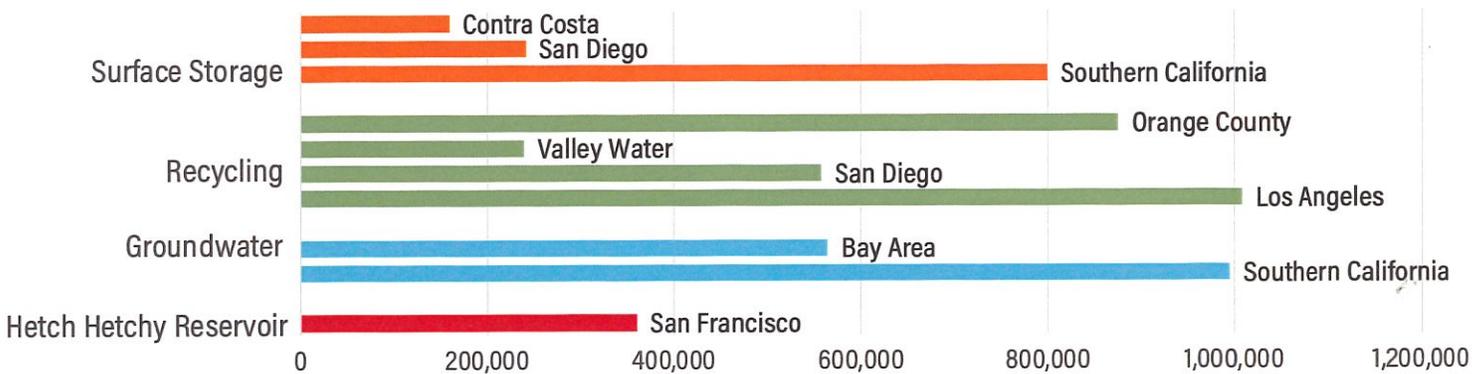


FIGURE 4: Summary of Recent and Ongoing Water Storage and Supply Projects for Cities in California

AVAILABLE WATER SUPPLY OVER A 6-YEAR DROUGHT (ACRE-FEET)

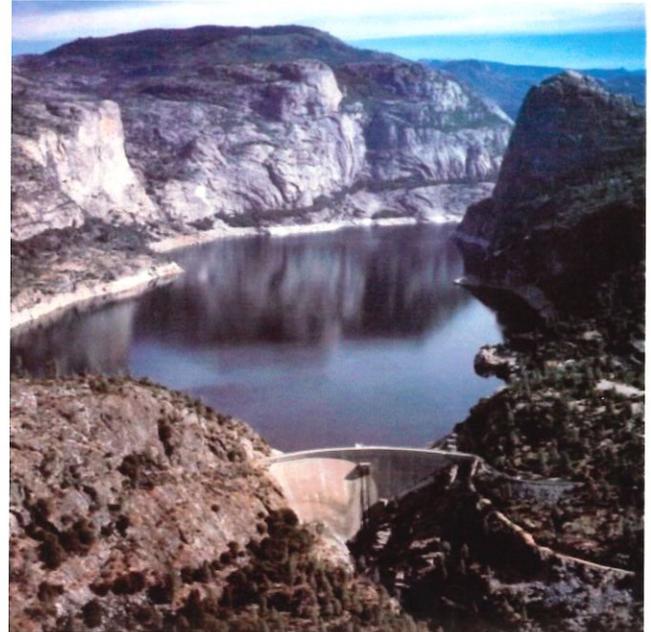


Recent investments by California’s cities in groundwater, recycling and local surface storage would *replace Hetch Hetchy Reservoir more than 15 times over*. The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission has the opportunity to pursue any or all of these technologies.

⁵ See *Yosemite’s Opportunity: Options For Replacing Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, Restore Hetch Hetchy, 2022*



When the Statue of Liberty was restored for its centennial in the 1980s, contributions totaled \$350,000,000 – roughly \$1,000,000,000 today. Is there any question that restoration of one of America’s flagship national parks would draw substantial philanthropic interest?

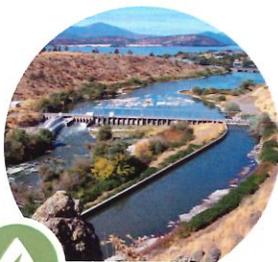


The O'Shaughnessy Dam could be entirely removed or merely breached to allow the river to pass – saving money and time. Visitors at the base of 2,000’ Kolana Rock would hardly notice a 300’ tall dam a mile away. Further into the valley, the dam would not be seen at all.

A TIME FOR ACTION

Water supply – the reason Congress allowed Hetch Hetchy Reservoir a century ago – is no longer a defensible justification for retaining it. No such project would be considered or authorized today. It is time to restore Hetch Hetchy Valley to Yosemite National Park, its wildlife and its visitors.

In addition to improving conveyance to assure uninterrupted and reliable water supplies to all customers of the San Francisco Regional Water System, other issues need to be addressed, including:



HYDROPOWER REPLACEMENT

Hydropower replacement, estimated at 349 GWh per year – a tiny fraction of statewide power – roughly half the generation lost when Klamath River dams were removed in 2024.



BREACH/REMOVE O'SHAUGHNESSY DAM

Deciding whether to breach or remove the O'Shaughnessy Dam to allow the Tuolumne River to flow naturally through the valley.



ESTABLISH FUNDING MECHANISMS

Establishing funding mechanisms for all phases of restoration.

Photo credits – Cover: Cherry Lake, U.S. National Park Service/Wikimedia Commons. Page 1: Vision of Restoration of Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley, LevelPar. 2004. Page 3: Fisheries, Salmon Spawning, EB Adventure Photography/Shutterstock; Hydropower, hrui/Shutterstock; Whitewater Recreation, StagHunter.id/Shutterstock; Water Obligations, Irrigation Canal in Modesto, California, JasonDojy/Shutterstock. Page 4: Cherry Reservoir, Pacific Southwest Region 5/Wikipedia. Page 6: Tuolumne River below Hetch Hetchy Rafting, Sierra Mac River Trips. Page 7: Statue of Liberty, New York, TZIDO SUN/Shutterstock; The O'Shaughnessy Dam, J. David Rodgers; Hydropower Replacement, Klamath Lake Reservoir and Dam, Bureau of Reclamation/Wikimedia Commons; O'Shaughnessy Dam, Hetch Hetchy Valley, SveKo/Shutterstock; Funding Mechanisms, Andrey_Popov/Shutterstock.



*Restoring Hetch Hetchy is an unprecedented opportunity —
to return a majestic, glacier-carved valley with soaring cliffs and waterfalls
to the American people; to reduce crowding by creating a second world-class valley
experience in Yosemite; to honor the Indigenous peoples who lived in the region
long before the arrival of European-Americans; and to preserve and elevate
a cherished natural legacy for generations to come.*

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Northern California Water Association and the State Water Contractors

Press Release

January 31, 2026

BAY DELTA PLAN: Water managers highlight early successes of Healthy Rivers and Landscapes projects at State Water Board hearings

During three days of hearings this week, January 28–30, the California State Water Resources Control Board heard testimony from state, regional and local water managers, local elected officials, state natural resource agency leaders, scientists, and community members from across the state expressing support for the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (HRL) Program as a balanced and science-based path forward in the update to the Bay-Delta Water Quality Control Plan. Opening remarks from state natural resource leadership on the first day of hearings can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/xc1Jp-vdRPw?t=1513>

The Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program is designed to balance protection of all beneficial uses of water in the Bay-Delta watershed while making measurable progress toward the recovery of Chinook salmon and other native species. This statewide collaborative effort pairs strategically timed river flows with habitat restoration, supported by ongoing monitoring and science-based adaptive management. Together, these actions are advancing solutions that benefit ecosystems, local economies, and California’s long-term water security.

“The Healthy Rivers and Landscapes (HRL) program combines two priorities that Californians care deeply about: environmental health and a reliable, affordable water supply,” said Jennifer Pierre, General Manager of the State Water Contractors. “HRL benefits are already being seen from 58 early implementation projects that have been completed along the American, Feather, Mokelumne, Sacramento, and Yuba rivers. These projects prove that when water managers, state and federal agencies, and communities work together – collaboratively – the needs of fish and people can be effectively balanced. The State Water Contractors stand with the Newsom Administration and a broad coalition of leaders from across the state to urge the Water Board to move the HRL program forward.”

On the first day of hearings, the Board heard from a panel of experts focused on early HRL implementation projects and lessons learned through monitoring habitat work and river flows. Panel participants included representatives from the Northern California Water Association, the California Department of Water Resources, East Bay Municipal Utility District, the Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee, and the Solano County Water Agency. The discussion highlighted progress already underway: 35 early implementation projects completed, seven in progress, and 16 ready to enter construction later this year across the Bay Delta watershed. For more information, read *Creating Essential Habitat Across the Bay-Delta Watershed*.

Panelists emphasized that collaboration among water agencies, landowners, conservation partners, and fishermen combined with data collection and adaptive management are central to prioritizing resources and improving outcomes. Early project monitoring shows improvements in juvenile salmon habitat conditions, and increased access to spawning and rearing areas.

Two early implementation success stories underscored these findings:

- Mokelumne River Habitat and Flow Improvements

Targeted habitat restoration and carefully timed flow releases have contributed to improved spawning carrying capacity, higher numbers of returning adult salmon, and increased contributions to the ocean salmon fishery. Scientific modeling continues to guide habitat design, and collaboration among agencies and landowners has accelerated implementation. Additional lower-river restoration sites are planned through 2026, with growing landowner participation signaling continued momentum.

- **Putah Creek Record Salmon Returns**

Putah Creek saw a record return of 2,150 spawning Chinook salmon in 2025, according to reporting from the Solano County Water Agency and biologists at the University of California, Davis. The milestone reflects the addition of targeted habitat restoration, gravel placement to improve spawning beds, adaptive water management, and regional collaboration to existing dedicated flows. Importantly, this success is not from any single action alone. For more information, read *Building a Salmon Run in Putah Creek*.

“The Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program offers a new way forward for California to manage our water resources in concert with our landscape,” said David Guy, President of the Northern California Water Association. “With our statewide commitment to more strategic flows, accelerated habitat restoration on our landscapes, and accountability, we can work together to meet the needs of our environment, farms, and local communities throughout California.”

Advancing the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program means investing in strategically timed flows integrated with on-the-ground habitat projects to create multi-benefit water management strategies that unite cities, communities, agriculture, and conservation partners. Representing 32 million Californians, this diverse coalition is working to improve conditions for fish and wildlife that rely on healthy rivers and landscapes and help build a more resilient Bay-Delta where rivers, farms, refuges, and communities can thrive.

The following water agencies are MOU signatories and actively participating in the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes Program:



The State Water Contractors is a statewide, non-profit association of 27 public agencies from Northern, Central and Southern California that purchase water under contract from the California State Water Project. Collectively, the State Water Contractors deliver water to more than 27 million residents throughout the state and more than 750,000 acres of agricultural land. For more information on the State Water Contractors, please visit www.swc.org.

The Northern California Water Association (NCWA) represents water agencies, irrigation districts, and communities across the Sacramento Valley committed to promoting reliable water supplies, healthy rivers and landscapes, and sustainable working lands that support local economies, fish and wildlife, and California's food system. For more information about NCWA, please visit www.norcalwater.org.

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Historically warm, dry January erases snowpack gains in Sierra Nevada

'Forecasts currently show no major precipitation'

SF Gate | February 3, 2026 | Andrew Pridgen



Skiers slalom through patches of dry ground at Palisades Tahoe on March 21, 2015, in Olympic Valley, Calif. Max Whittaker/Getty Images

After some much-needed holiday storm carryover kicked off the year in Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada, the region slogged through its own version of dry January; now, there's a tough road ahead to recover from a mostly snow-free start to 2026.

"A dry January, which is historically the wettest month of the year in California, has now eroded the gains made at the start of the year and forecasts currently show no major precipitation in the next two weeks," California Department of Weather Resources spokesperson Jason Ince wrote in a Jan. 30 news release.

The first month of the year certainly left the area warmer and drier than usual, weather officials confirmed. Even worse, they also corroborated the notion that there isn't much in the offing to kick off February either.

"We had some storms come through on New Year's. After that, it was pretty dry," Tony Fuentes, a forecaster for the National Weather Service in Reno, told SFGATE on Monday.



FILE: Nearby mountain peaks are covered with snow near the Phillips Station meadow shortly before the California Department of Water Resources conducted the third media snow survey of the 2022 season at Phillips Station in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Kenneth James/California Department of Water Resources

South Lake Tahoe finished the month with 2.19 inches of precipitation, making it the 16th driest January on record since the weather service began tracking the region in 1968, Fuentes said. On the north side of the lake, Tahoe City, which has been keeping records since 1909, fared much worse: 1.07 inches of precipitation, making it the 13th driest January over more than a century.

Along with being dry, the temperatures were also among the warmest on record. In South Lake Tahoe, the average temperature for January was 44.4 degrees, Fuentes said, for the 14th warmest January since records were kept. And Tahoe City's average temperature was 41.3 degrees, clocking in at 25th warmest January since 1909.

The dry January also took snowpack totals way down from a promising beginning of the year. Last Friday, the Department of Water Resources conducted its second snow survey of the season at Phillips Station in South Lake Tahoe. The totals trended down precipitously from the previous survey.

"The manual survey recorded 23 inches of snow depth and a snow water equivalent of 8 inches, which is 46 percent of average for this location," last week's news release from DWR noted, reporting that snowpack is currently 59% of average.

These diminished totals are juxtaposed to the dramatic gains reported just three weeks ago, when the snowpack "was 89 percent of average after a series of atmospheric rivers provided relief."

From here on, playing catch-up may not be easy.

“We are now two-thirds through what should be the best snow-producing months of the year,” Andy Reising, DWR’s manager of snow surveys and water supply forecasting, said in a released statement. “While there is still time for February and March to deliver additional snow, the farther into the season we get with below average conditions, the harder it will be to catch up.”

Weather forecaster Fuentes agreed, noting that while there may be some relief in a shift of weather patterns and storms coming in February, overall it’s still not looking like a prolific winter is headed to the Sierra Nevada any time soon.

“We have pretty much one more week of pretty dry conditions,” he said. “Maybe by this weekend, starting maybe Sunday into next week, we’ll see some [activity]. We’ve been stuck underneath this big, stubborn high pressure, but there’s not a big major wet signal right now. Next week will at least allow some moisture to filter in.”

The good news is that despite the dry spell, the state’s reservoirs still remain at “126 percent of average thanks to recent precipitation on top of three consecutive years of above-average snowpack conditions,” DWR’s statement said.

Meanwhile, snow sports enthusiasts are still praying for a prolific end to February and a Miracle March.

“We’re not setting up for a big, wet pattern,” Fuentes concluded. “No atmospheric rivers or such — not any type of big, glaring wet signal so far.”

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California isn't getting enough snow. Here's what it means for water supplies

San Francisco Chronicle | January 30, 2026 | Kurtis Alexander,



Donner Lake near Truckee in Nevada County was blasted with snow in late December and early January, but snowfall in the Sierra Nevada has since slowed. William Hale Irwin/For the S.F. Chronicle

This month's lingering dry spell has combined with warm winter temperatures to take a toll on California's mountain snow, raising new questions about the durability of water supplies this year.

State water officials, who conducted the second snow survey of the season Friday, reported that cumulative snowpack across the Sierra Nevada, southern Cascades and Trinity mountains measured 59% of average for the date.

Surveyors conducting manual readings at the landmark Phillips Station near Lake Tahoe, one of the longest-running and most representative measuring sites, found even less snow: 23 inches, or 46% of the average.

The measurements come at roughly the midway point in winter and, as such, begin to shed light on the state's 2026 water outlook. Snow makes up nearly a third of California's water supply, as it melts into rivers and reservoirs. The melt-off is particularly important because it comes in spring and summer, helping quench thirsts after the wet season. It's also vital for hydropower dams and mitigating wildfire danger.

“This is not the time we want to be going backwards,” said Andy Reising, manager of the snow surveys and water supply forecasting unit at the California Department of Water Resources. “We are now about halfway through the typically wettest part of the year, which is December through March, when we should be seeing the most snowpack gains. We still have February and March, but each dry week we have will make it more difficult to catch up.”

While snowfall has lagged, the good news is that rain has been fairly robust.

Despite several dry weeks recently, average rainfall statewide is running about 120% of what it typically is at this point in the water year, which goes from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30, according to state data. The rain has helped bolster reservoirs, which were already fuller than normal after three years that were wet or moderately wet.

Shasta Lake, the state’s largest reservoir, on Thursday held 124% of what it typically holds this time of year, while Lake Oroville, the second-largest reservoir, held 138%.

This week, the Department of Water Resources, which operates many of the state’s big reservoirs, announced that it was increasing the amount of water it expects to provide cities and towns in 2026, though only modestly: from 10% of what was requested to 30%.

Many water managers were hopeful that the state’s water picture would be faring better at this point in the winter.

A series of powerful storms in late December and early January pushed average statewide rainfall to almost 160% for the season to date. Snowpack climbed to nearly average. The widely watched U.S. Drought Monitor, meanwhile, classified California as 100% drought-free for the first time in 25 years.

The spigot of wet weather, however, shut off. The latter part of January has been bone dry. San Francisco, for example, hasn’t received more than a tenth of an inch of rain since Jan. 5, according to the National Weather Service.

“This year could still become a drought if the amount of rain we’ve gotten over the past three weeks continues for the next two months,” said Jay Lund, an emeritus professor of civil and environmental engineering at UC Davis and longtime water scholar.

Lund noted that the Drought Monitor, which declared California drought-less on Jan. 8, doesn’t assert that the state is wet, only that it’s not dry.

“It’s good to not be in drought anymore, but that doesn’t mean you can quit worrying about it,” he said. “California water is fickle.”

More dry weather would begin to erode the gains that state reservoirs have recently experienced, though at current heights, water storage is not likely to slip to worrisome levels anytime soon.

The National Weather Service doesn't expect significant rain or snow across most of California for at least the next week.

"We're looking to be high and dry for quite a while," said meteorologist Karleisa Rogacheski with the weather service.

For the duration of winter, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center is forecasting drier than average conditions across most of the state.

The scant snow in California mirrors a broader trend across the West, which some meteorologists are labeling a snow drought. Higher than average temperatures have meant precipitation that might have fallen as snow instead falls as rain. It's a dynamic playing out increasingly as the planet warms. Some scientists fear California's snowpack could gradually disappear.

California is among nine Western states that experienced their warmest December on record this winter, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. In January, California temperatures have remained above average.

As tracked by the Department of Water Resources, the average snowpack across California's mountain ranges stands at 9.7 inches of "snow water equivalent," meaning it would produce that much water if it melted. That's 59% of the average for the date.

Snowpack was most sparse in the state's far north where it measured 7.1 inches of snow water equivalent, representing 44% of average for the date. This region is especially important because it's where the state's biggest reservoirs are.

The central Sierra, meanwhile, measured 59% of average snowpack for the date while the southern Sierra measured 77% of average.

California's snow survey program collects snow data from more than 265 locations. About 130 spots are monitored electronically and provide daily assessments.

The Department of Water Resources will continue to take snow measurements through at least the beginning of April, when snowpack has historically peaked. At that time, the state will have a much clearer picture of water conditions for the year.

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A long-awaited California water policy promises balance. Opponents call it an ‘extinction plan’

San Francisco Chronicle | February 4, 2026 | Kurtis Alexander,



Old River runs through farmland in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta outside Discovery Bay. State water regulators are mulling a plan to improve ecological conditions in the delta.

Carlos Avila Gonzalez/The Chronicle

California is on the cusp of adopting a sweeping plan to manage the ecologically stressed Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a move that Gov. Gavin Newsom deems “critical” to protecting state water supplies but critics are calling a major environmental setback.

The state’s Bay Delta Plan, years in the making, aims to moderate the amount of water that cities and farms take out of rivers and creeks, from Fresno to the Oregon border, to ensure enough is left to flow downstream to the delta. As it stands, some upstream rivers at certain times of the year see as much as 90% of their water diverted.

Last week, at three days of public hearings in Sacramento, scores of conservationists, fishermen, delta residents and Native Americans blasted the plan as doing too little to rein in water users, saying struggling fish, wildlife and water quality would not see the improvements

they need. It was a last-ditch bid to derail the policy, which state water regulators appear likely to sign off on later this year.

“Current and future generations will be affected by the decision you make,” said Molly Culton, an organizing manager at Sierra Club California, which opposes the plan. “You will either side with corporate agriculture and big business water interests or be on the side of the environment, tribal nations and normal everyday people who live, recreate and depend on not only the delta but all of California’s river and land systems.”

The delta is a vast estuary between the Bay Area and Sacramento where California’s major rivers drain. It’s also a vital hub for water deliveries. The region has been increasingly burdened by dwindling freshwater flows and poor water quality, creating problems for both the delta’s water exports, to Silicon Valley, the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California, and the estuary itself, with its myriad native life, including coveted salmon runs. Some fish species are on the verge of extinction.

The State Water Resources Control Board is proposing an update to the Bay Delta Plan that tries to strike a balance between increasing flows into the delta while not crippling the water agencies that tap the rivers feeding the delta. These urban and agricultural agencies have worried that the state regulation would deplete their supplies or be too costly, but they largely support the new update. The agencies include water departments in the Bay Area.

California Natural Resources Secretary Wade Crowfoot, speaking on behalf of the Newsom administration last week, praised the updated plan as even-handed. He maintained that it would leave enough water in rivers to help the ailing delta, which in addition to salmon is home to smelt, steelhead trout and sturgeon as well as sandhill cranes, river otters, mink and many other animals.

Crowfoot urged the state water board to quickly move forward.

“This is poised to happen under your watch, and I know Gov. Newsom and we are all really proud of you piloting this complicated, careful process to its conclusion,” he said. “Our nature and our people desperately need it.”

The majority of the more than 200 speakers at the hearings, however, criticized the draft plan, often with passionate testimony, arguing that the state was simply placating water users and failing to demand the deeper water cutbacks necessary for restoring the delta and the upstream rivers. They said it was a missed opportunity for meaningful ecological gain.

The hearings were focused specifically on rivers and creeks in the Sacramento River watershed, which feeds the delta from the north, as well as the waterways in the delta. The water board has already held hearings and updated the management strategy for the San Joaquin River watershed, which nourishes the delta from the south. The updates will eventually be merged into a new Bay Delta Plan and implemented.

The plan is required under state and federal law. It is periodically reviewed and updated. The last significant changes were in 1995.

The opponents, in particular, took issue with the plan's inclusion of "voluntary agreements." The agreements are deals reached between state water officials and dozens of urban and agricultural water agencies that allow the agencies to perform river restoration projects in exchange for looser regulations on how much water they take.

Instead of having to make sure rivers and creeks maintain certain minimum flows, as originally proposed, the agencies have committed to help increase flows a negotiated amount by taking less water, as spelled out in the agreements in the plan. The agencies would also pay for, perform and monitor restoration work upstream of the delta, to improve fish habitat and water quality.

While critics don't object to the restoration projects, they say the deals on the additional water flows don't go far enough to lift river levels. Many want to see the initial flow standards reinstated.

"There is no evidence in the record that the voluntary agreements will move the needle on the status quo, which is decline," said Jon Rosenfield, senior scientist at the environmental organization San Francisco Baykeeper, who has studied the imperiled fish populations in the delta. "The volunteer agreements are an extinction plan."

Critics also are skeptical of the planning process, which has given water agencies a say over their water reductions and how they account for them.

"It's analogous to repealing speed limits and asking people to self-report how fast they drive," said Barry Nelson, senior policy adviser for the Golden State Salmon Association and longtime water watchdog. "It's time for the (water) board to reject Gov. Newsom's backroom water scam."

The state water board and several water agencies defended the voluntary agreements throughout the hearings. They framed them as a good-faith compromise that comes with the added benefit of restoration work, which the state couldn't otherwise compel. They said it was a more holistic way of improving the health of the delta and the rivers upstream.

"While (river) flow is a critical master variable, flow alone cannot recover the native species if the physical landscape remains degraded," said Ashlee Casey, executive director and senior engineer at the Water Forum, an organization that advocates for sustainable water supplies on the lower American River. "By integrating flow with specific engineered habitat improvements, we maximize the biological benefit of every acre-foot of water that is in the river."

Water agencies that don't sign on to the voluntary agreements will still face the requirement of having to maintain a minimum river flow.

The voluntary agreements are the outcome of years of negotiations after the state water board initially pursued the flow requirements. The flow-based regulations, however, encountered fierce opposition from water agencies, which said they could be left with water shortages, forced to tap overdrawn groundwater reserves or driven to raise customer rates to pay for new water projects.

Under the threat of litigation and fear of not being able to advance the Bay Delta Plan, water board officials agreed to relax their demands and enter into negotiations.

Nicholas Schneider, general manager of the Georgetown Divide Public Utility District in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, praised the development of the voluntary agreements as sparing his region a lot of hardship.

“If we lose any of our water supply, our community of 12,000 people could be in jeopardy of not being able to provide water to those people,” he said.

As the voluntary agreements took shape, the makeup of the state water board and its direction also changed. Newsom in 2019 opted to not renew the term of the board’s chair Felicia Marcus, who was viewed by many water agencies as leading the push to boost river flows. Joaquin Esquivel, who has presented himself as a collaborator, has since run the board.

At last week’s hearings, Esquivel called the state’s work with the water agencies a “novel approach to achieving both ecological and water-use benefits.”

Complicating efforts to develop the Bay Delta Plan, wide disagreement remains over exactly how much more water the delta needs to thrive. The estuary’s freshwater flows have been undercut by saltwater intrusion, hotter and drier weather and delta pumping, among other things. Various assessments of the water need have been done, with the only real consensus being that more water is better.

The state water board began crafting its plan with a goal of trying to maintain 55% of the natural flow in the rivers and creeks that feed the delta from the Sacramento River watershed, meaning 45% of the water could be pumped off or captured in reservoirs. In the San Joaquin River watershed, the goal was to maintain 40% of the natural flow. Rivers throughout the state could end up with significantly less water, particularly in dry years, with the flow targets no longer universally in place.

A number of unknowns also cloud the calculations about how much more water should flow into the delta. The Trump administration has pledged to increase pumping in the estuary, at the federally run Central Valley Project, which means the delta would need even more replenishment.

Additionally, two new water projects, the proposed Sites Reservoir in the Sacramento Valley and a planned 45-mile tunnel beneath the delta to expedite water shipments, could shift the water equation, though proponents of the ventures have said they won't undermine inflow to the delta.

The state water board plans to address the comments made on the Bay Delta Plan before proceeding with approval.

"We are doing our best to balance the many needs and pressures here and move ourselves, as we've said, into the modern regulatory regime that this state deserves," said Esquivel, at the conclusion of the hearings. "I know it can seem like it's Groundhog Day and this board isn't being responsive. ... But we are."

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How to best protect the Delta? California water agencies advocate for flexibility

Sacramento Bee | February 3, 2026 | Chaewon Chung

Updated February 3, 2026

Regional water agencies on Monday urged the State Water Resources Control Board to advance a voluntary agreement option in the updated Bay-Delta plan that would give agencies more flexibility in how they meet state water rules. Under Healthy Rivers and Landscapes, the regional agencies would not be mandated to strict river flow targets.

In a letter reviewed by The Sacramento Bee, the Sacramento Regional Water Authority wrote to state water regulators on behalf of anticipated American River Healthy Rivers and Landscapes participants, asserting that relying only on the regulatory pathway would create severe “trade-offs” for regional water supplies and river ecosystems.

The regulatory pathway, meanwhile, is the board’s framework that would impose an “unimpaired-flow requirement,” which would require about half of river flows to keep moving downstream instead of being stored in winter and spring. The flow rules would apply to water users outside the voluntary program, which local water agencies say could undermine the state’s water supply stability and the Delta ecosystem.

Under the current proposal, the regulatory pathway could also be imposed on Healthy Rivers and Landscapes participants if the State Water Board concludes the voluntary approach is falling short. For now, the draft does not clearly define the specific conditions or decision-making process that would trigger that shift.

“We would like to note at the outset that we believe the Bay-Delta Plan Updates are ready for adoption, with the ability to collaboratively refine specific points at a future date,” the letter read.

“The comments in this letter are intended to (...) create an awareness of these trade-offs as the State Board prepares for Plan adoption.”

Regional agencies press for a balanced path forward

Monday’s letter recognizes that the regulatory pathway exists as a fallback, but it mainly warns the state water board not to set up the plan in a way that would push the voluntary agreement pathway to fail and trigger the regulatory option’s flow rules.

In a 19-page letter, the agencies echoed concerns raised by Andy Fecko of the Placer County Water Agency and Jim Peifer of the Sacramento Regional Water Authority on Thursday, warning that the flow rule spelled out in the regulatory approach could destabilize groundwater storage in the American River basin and raise river temperatures for salmon.

Citing the proposed plan’s projection that groundwater storage in the American River basin could decline by more than 1 million acre-feet, the regional water officials said the “decline to groundwater storage within the American River region would be devastating and completely infeasible.”

“It would thoroughly deplete the American River region’s efforts to address climate change and force a return to unsustainable pumping, reversing the very progress the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) seeks to achieve,” the letter added, referring to the state law aimed at restoring “critically overdrafted” groundwater basins to sustainability by 2040.

By pushing more water downstream in winter and spring, the proposal would leave less water stored in reservoirs and less cold water available to cool rivers later in the year. Modeling of the regulatory plan suggests river temperatures below Folsom dam and near Hazel and Watt avenues could rise by as much as three degrees from April through November.

Lower American River temperatures are “already high when compared to other Sacramento River tributaries,” the regional water officials noted, arguing any temperature increases could negatively impact fall-run Chinook salmon and Central Valley steelhead populations. The regulatory pathway’s monthly modeling could also be masking more severe daily temperature spikes, their letter noted.

“We encourage the State Board to adopt the Healthy River and Landscapes (HRL) program to alleviate the impacts of strictly and solely adopting the regulatory pathway,” the letter continued.

Tribal nations challenge voluntary framework

Meanwhile, tribal and conservation groups strongly opposed the voluntary agreement framework. Healthy Rivers and Landscapes’ flexibility represents potentially weakened enforceable safeguards for environmental and tribal groups, as the program relies on voluntary commitments instead of mandatory flow standards.

They have pointed to recent federal changes allowing increased water pumping from the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta under Action 5, urging the state board members to consider that added exports put more stress on water and ecosystems.

During last week’s three-day hearing, tribal leaders said they had been excluded from the voluntary agreement process.

Morning Star Gali, a Pit River tribal member, warned the voluntary agreement framework would result in “privatizing water, prioritizing corporate profit over people” and forcing tribal people “to carry the burden of protecting our waterways.”

“For Wilton Rancheria, Delta conditions directly affect cultural practices, subsistence activities, and stewardship responsibilities,” Vince LaPena from the Wilton Rancheria said on Thursday.

“Salmon and other aquatic species are not merely ecological indicators — they are integral to the Tribe’s cultural identity, traditional knowledge systems, food sovereignty, and responsibilities to future generations,” LaPena added.

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Bay-Delta water plan divides tribes, farmers and regulators

Sacramento Bee | January 30, 2026 | Chaewon Chung

California is weighing its first major rewrite of Bay-Delta water rules in decades, considering changes to how much water must remain in rivers and giving regional water agencies a more flexible way to comply with those limits.

On the second day of a three-day State Water Resources Control Board hearing on Thursday, stakeholders fell into three broad camps as they continued to debate how California should manage the Bay-Delta in the years ahead.

They included state officials backing adoption of the plan, environmental and tribal groups seeking stronger protections, and water agencies that welcomed added flexibility but pushed for major changes to the staff proposal.

Critics call for stronger safeguards

During a presentation on Wednesday, board staff walked through the revised draft Bay-Delta Plan released in December.

The Bay-Delta is managed with the state water board setting specific limits for how much water must stay in rivers and what counts as acceptable water quality, and building those limits into permits and orders, leaving water agencies with little room for how they meet those rules.

The proposed plan would instead let water agencies opt into a new program, under which the agencies would follow a negotiated package of timed water releases, habitat restoration work and long-term monitoring, rather than only meeting fixed flow targets through traditional regulations.

With that proposal, agencies that join the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes program would have more flexibility in how they meet the state's requirements for keeping enough water in rivers and protecting water quality.

"I am passionate that this is the pathway to recover fish ... people, tribes, fishermen, all of us who rely on those fisheries," Wade Crowfoot, California's Natural Resources secretary, said during Wednesday's hearing.

Critics, including environmental and tribal groups, as well as commercial and recreational fishing advocates such as John McManus of the Golden State Salmon Association, say the proposal opens the door to weakened enforceable safeguards.

"We need better benchmarks so that if (the plan) fails, you can act expeditiously," McManus said during public comment on Thursday, urging the State Water Resources Control Board to factor

in recent federal changes that allow increased pumping from the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta under what is known as Action 5.

With those new federal rules allowing more water to be pumped from the Delta, the conservation group says fish are under even greater strain, arguing the state’s Bay-Delta plan should have simple checkpoints to tighten protections if the voluntary program doesn’t do enough to protect salmon and other struggling fish.

Noting that the advocates are not seeking to end irrigated agriculture, McManus contended that recent salmon rebounds followed wetter years with more water in rivers, not habitat projects.

“We’re losing species. We’ve lost the Delta smelt, long fin smelt are hammered. Salmon runs have gotten hammered, and even our hatchery runs in the Sacramento Valley are negatively affected by flow conditions in the Sacramento River. So we need some help,” McManus added.

The board is not taking any action during this week’s hearing, which concludes Friday. It will accept written comments through Monday and then consider final action on the Bay-Delta update at a later, publicly noticed meeting, Board Chair E. Joaquin Esquivel said.

A day ahead of the hearing, leaders of environmental and tribal groups reiterated their opposition to the proposal, criticizing its reliance on voluntary agreements that they said could benefit water users without meaningful public accountability or tribal consent.

“The proposed update prioritizes water districts and wealthy agricultural interests over the Board’s obligations to uphold the Public Trust Doctrine and protect water quality for the Tribes and communities that depend upon Delta waterways,” Morgen Snyder, director of policy and programs at Restore the Delta said in a statement.

Water agencies back Healthy Rivers but want looser flow rules

For some water agencies, the proposal’s added flexibility under Healthy Rivers and Landscapes was a selling point, but officials also urged changes to key parts of the staff proposal, especially the rules for how much water must stay in rivers.

Multiple local water agency representatives said they support the overall framework of the Healthy Rivers and Landscapes program, but warned that the updated plan’s mandatory unimpaired flow standards could threaten the state’s water supply reliability.

The crux of the issue lies in proposed flow rules that would require up to 55% of the natural water flow remain in the river during winter and spring, rather than being captured and stored in reservoirs.

Andy Fecko, general manager of the Placer County Water Agency, told The Sacramento Bee the proposed flow rules would drain reservoirs too early in the year and increase river

temperatures later in the summer, complicating efforts to protect fish and stabilize groundwater supplies.

“Not only does the staff proposal significantly impact Sacramento region’s water supply, but it’s actually detrimental in the long term to threatened species on the lower American River like steelhead and for all salmonoids,” Fecko said.

At Folsom Reservoir, rain and snow typically arrive in winter and early spring, followed by long, hot summers that can last much of the year. The reservoir is designed to capture spring snowmelt and hold that water so it can be used later, including during the hottest months.

Under the state’s proposal, however, Fecko explained, federal operators would be required to pass through roughly 55% of incoming water between January and June instead of storing it — meaning the reservoir would enter summer at a much lower level than usual.

“That significantly lower reservoir then heats up more quickly in the hot summers. By the fall, when salmon are coming into the system, there is no cold water left, because you have less water (at Folsom Reservoir) to start with,” Fecko said.

Simply put, with less water stored, the reservoir loses its ability to stay cool, causing temperatures to rise by late summer. In effect, according to Fecko, releasing more water in winter and spring leaves less water to manage temperatures later in the year, increasing the risk of higher river temperatures when fish are most vulnerable.

Jim Peifer, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Water Authority, agreed, while also pointing out that reduced surface water storage could force water agencies to rely more heavily on groundwater pumping.

“The staff proposal had indicated that there could be an impact of nearly a million acre feet on the groundwater basin in our region,” Peifer said, adding that it would undermine the region’s efforts to adapt to climate change and strengthen long-term water supply reliability.

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Building California's water future: DWR's framework for the 2028 Water Plan and SB 72 implementation

Maven's Notebook | February 4, 2026



At the January meeting of the California Water Commission, Joel Metzger, Deputy Director of Statewide Water Resources Planning at the Department of Water Resources (DWR), presented an overview of the proposed framework for organizing the 2028 California Water Plan, the rollout of Senate Bill 72, and coordination and consultation with the Commission.

The passage of Senate Bill 72 authorizes DWR to develop a data-driven playbook to guide and secure California's water future. The legislation establishes a target to identify 9 million acre-feet of additional water supply by 2040 to address anticipated losses from rising temperatures.

Mr. Metzger shared early conceptual ideas for the 2028 Water Plan update and Senate Bill 72 implementation, emphasizing that these are preliminary concepts and that many decisions remain pending. Final decisions will need to be made quickly to initiate the process, as the legislation was only signed on October 1, and the water plan is due in a few years. With only about a year available for technical work, the process must begin immediately, with a statewide launch anticipated as early as mid-February.

Background

Over the years, the California Water Plan has evolved into a comprehensive inventory of water conditions across the state, providing a snapshot of current challenges and, in some cases, serving as the only source of statewide water data. Originally launched in 1957, the plan was designed to guide the development and management of California's water resources. While it has become a valuable resource, its role has shifted over time, focusing more on monitoring and reporting than on proactive planning.

SB 72: From Passage to Implementation

- Signed by Governor on October 1, 2025; now enacted and in effect
- Focus shifts from legislation to implementation planning
- Phased implementation began in 2026
- Integration with California Water Plan beginning with Update 2028



Mr. Metzger highlighted the value of the California Water Plan, noting that over the years it has evolved into a vital resource, providing a comprehensive inventory of statewide conditions and, in some cases, the only available statewide data. He described it as a “great document” that is widely used and appreciated. However, he emphasized the need to adapt to the growing challenges posed by extreme weather and climate change.

“We need a new era of planning,” he said. “We need to take a different approach. One of the things I’m excited about through SB 72 implementation and the new water plan in 2028 is really making this plan as accessible and usable for water managers across the state, something they can reach for regularly. So I look forward to your help thinking about that and also how we can move the state forward.”

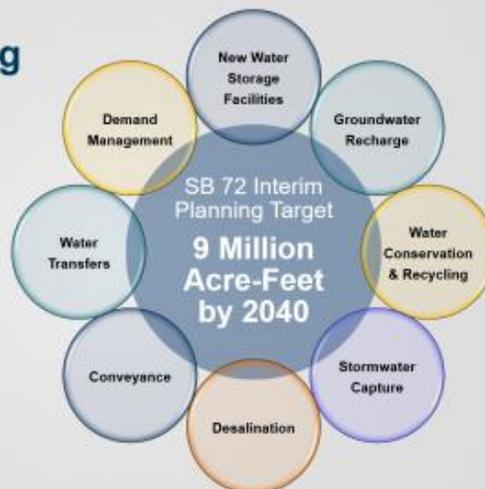
The legislative journey to SB 72 began two years ago when Senator Anna Caballero introduced SB 366. Although the bill passed both the Assembly and Senate, it was vetoed by the Governor due to budget concerns, not policy disagreements. The legislation was subsequently revised to reduce costs, and the reworked version, SB 72, successfully passed the legislature and was signed into law by the Governor on October 1.

SB 72: A Modernized California Water Plan – what the legislation directs

SB 72 establishes the first-ever statewide water supply target, an interim target of 9 million acre-feet by 2040, and directs the Department of Water Resources (DWR) to determine a target for water supply for 2050. Specifically, the bill requires DWR to update the interim planning target for 2050 as part of the 2033 update to the California Water Plan.

SB 72: Planning Levers to Achieve the Interim Target

Strategy categories under the California Water Plan



“It’s an ambitious target that will be a driver of creativity and out-of-the-box thinking, so I’m excited that we have a lofty goal here that we can work toward,” Mr. Metzger said.

• **The legislation transforms the California Water Plan from a source of advisory guidance into a clear, actionable implementation framework.**

It mandates a shift toward a modernized, assertive planning process that emphasizes statewide coordination and consultation. This includes expanding collaboration to involve the

Water Commission and ensuring broad, inclusive engagement across the state. By bringing diverse voices to the table, the goal is to create a plan that not only reflects the needs of all stakeholders but also serves as a practical and effective roadmap for California's water future.

- **The legislation enhances coordination and consultation to ensure that planning aligns with both statewide priorities and regional realities.** To achieve the 9 million acre-feet water supply target, it provides a range of tools, including the development of new surface and groundwater storage facilities, water conservation and recycling, stormwater capture, desalination, improved conveyance, water transfers, and demand management strategies.
- **The legislation also emphasizes expanded collaboration by directing the Department of Water Resources (DWR) to involve the Water Commission, tribes, labor, environmental justice groups, and other stakeholders, fostering inclusivity and diverse input.** Additionally, the legislation mandates public workshops to gather feedback and promote transparency throughout the planning process.

"There are lots of strong opinions about all of these, so I think we'll have some robust conversations about what is in the mix that will make it into the plan to get us to 9 million acre-feet," said Mr. Metzger. "There will be a strategy for this in the 2028 plan."

Outreach and collaboration will be key

DWR's Division of Planning will lead the development of the California Water Plan, but the effort will not occur in isolation. Instead, it will be a collaborative, integrated initiative across multiple DWR departments, including the State Water Project, Sustainable Groundwater Management, Flood Management, and Multi-benefit Initiatives. This internal coordination will ensure a comprehensive approach to water planning.

Externally, DWR will work closely with state agency partners through a committee of representatives to align on key aspects of the Water Plan's strategies. Public engagement will also play a critical role, with regional workshops held across the state to gather input, share updates, and ensure transparency. The Water Commission will be a key partner in this coordination and consultation process.

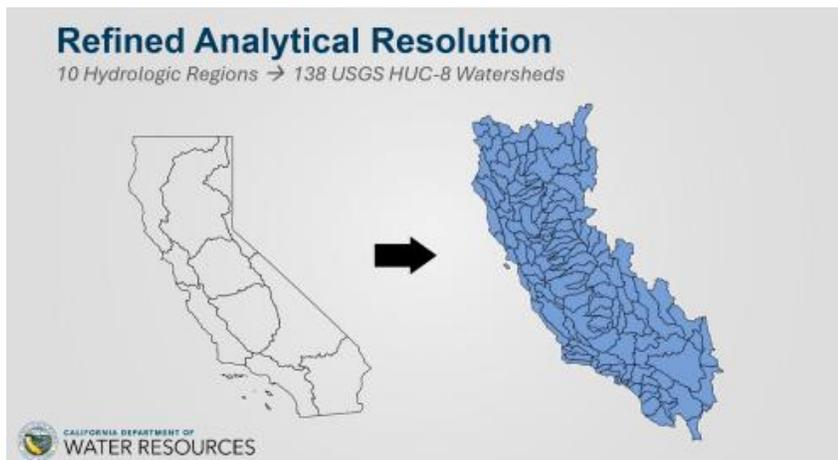
To ensure broad representation, DWR is carefully considering how to structure the advisory committee to include all interested parties identified in the legislation. The legislation specifically highlights the inclusion of urban and agricultural water suppliers, local governments, businesses, agriculture, environmental and environmental justice groups, tribes, labor, construction trades, public water infrastructure representatives, and other interested parties as appropriate. Meetings will be open to the public, and DWR is required to consult with and consider recommendations from these groups, with the flexibility to bring in additional expertise as needed.

The first advisory committee meeting could take place as early as March, with monthly meetings anticipated. The plan includes regional and issue-based caucuses, as well as a dedicated tribal advisory committee, which is being developed in collaboration with Anecita Augstinez, DWR's Tribal Policy Advisor. Additionally, technical workgroups will provide guidance on modeling practices and methodologies.

The implementation plan

To achieve the mandates of SB 72, including the 9 million acre-feet target and the 2050 water supply goal, we are focusing on three key work streams:

- **Data:** Develop statewide, watershed-scale datasets using advanced technology to support planning models and activities. This includes improving water use and supply data, applying climate change scenarios, and identifying supply-demand gaps for each watershed over a 50-year horizon.
- **Targets:** Establish localized, credible targets for urban, agricultural, Tribal, and environmental water needs. These targets will focus on detailed watershed-level planning (HUC-8 scale) and align with the Governor’s 2022 Water Supply Strategy and SGMA, providing actionable insights for local water managers.
- **Actions:** Create place-specific strategies, including nature-based solutions, to close supply-demand gaps. This includes cost-benefit analyses, progress tracking, and integration across state, federal, and local planning efforts to ensure long-term water supply security.



“We will provide adaptation strategies to all individual watersheds across the state,” Mr. Metzger said. “This really tracks with our push to move to a watershed level for water management. We want to look from the Sierra Crest down to the valley floor, to groundwater, out to the Delta, and into other watersheds, really looking at that holistically,” said Mr. Metzger.

“Going from 10 to 138 is a huge, huge lift. But once we can get there, we feel like it’s going to be much more accessible to the average water managers across the state.”

Preliminary timeline

A statewide launch of public materials is planned for next month. The work required to develop the 2028 California Water Plan will roll out in 2026 and 2027, with the draft plan released a year in advance for public review. The finalized 2028 plan will be completed by the end of 2028. Following this, efforts will continue to refine the technical work required for the 2033 plan, as many of the mandates outlined in SB 72 are due by then.

Funding a concern

Mr. Metzger emphasized that funding remains a critical concern for meeting the mandates outlined in SB 72 by 2033. While there is appreciation for the funding included in the January 10 budget to support this work, securing adequate resources is essential to ensure successful implementation.

“Based on the funding level that ends up being approved when the budget’s finalized this year for next fiscal year, that’s going to have a direct impact on our ability to deliver these mandates in SB 72, so we just want to make sure that we are communicating about the impacts of that,” Mr. Metzger said.

Looking forward ...

The Commissioners expressed strong support for the ambitious SB 72 effort, emphasizing its importance in addressing climate change and growing water needs. They highlighted the Commission’s expertise in public outreach, stakeholder engagement, and reporting.

“We have been a long-time arm of the department in doing the public outreach to the disadvantaged communities, the water community, the tribal communities, and we certainly are offering our assistance in that way, and hope that you’ll be calling us,” said Chair Fern Steiner.

Mr. Metzger said he was excited to really work on meaningful collaboration and coordination with the Commission that brings things forward, that actually make it into this plan, and that influence the process.

“I want to leave you with one more thing. One of my commitments as a former journalist, way back in my career, is all the way through this process; my goal is to talk in layman’s terms to everyone, not just water managers, but to everyone in our state, and make this very understandable and digestible. I want board members, council members, and people to understand what we’re talking about, even if they aren’t water experts. And I think that if we can’t do that, then nothing else we do is going to be successful. So that’s a huge priority for me and my team in this process, and I think it’s a big priority for DWR as a whole, is to be better translators of the technical to the everyday person.”

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How the State Water Project Used Adaptive Management to Capture More Water During Recent Storms

Department of Water Resources | January 28, 2026



Clifton Court Forebay, which is located two miles upstream of the Banks Pumping Plant in Contra Costa County, California. The Forebay is located on the southwestern edge of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta in Contra Costa County. Photo taken on October 30, 2025.

As runoff from the last sizable storm was rolling down California rivers to San Francisco Bay in December, operators of the State Water Project used scientific information and modeling about the movement of fish species in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to adjust operations and capture additional water supply without compromising species protections.

Flexibility in the project's Incidental Take Permit (ITP), plus tight coordination with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), allowed for a modest boost in State Water Project storage. Such flexibility is increasingly important in an era of weather

whiplash. Long stretches of dry days frequently follow big storms, as happened in January.

Operation of the State Water Project during the storm that began in mid-December illustrates how the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) managed adaptively, in coordination with regulators, to balance protection of endangered species and water supply for 27 million Californians. It demonstrates the usefulness of cutting-edge science and the importance of coordination among agency scientists.

DWR's ITP calls for the State Water Project to ramp down pumping during the first big storms of the season. Otherwise known as the "first flush" period, monitoring data shows that this is the time when endangered species such as Chinook salmon move downstream to the ocean or when endangered sturgeon and smelt species migrate to upstream spawning grounds. In either case, fish risk being salvaged or killed if they move into south Delta channels near the State Water Project pumping plant.

When the mid-December storm arrived, DWR scientists evaluated risk for fish at the pumps using real-time monitoring information and prediction models. During the "first flush" event, DWR scientists hypothesized that fish salvage at the pumps would decrease as river flows to the Delta increased. Subsequently, DWR proposed a modification to the "first flush" action to CDFW, requesting additional water supply exports as river flows increased to high levels. CDFW approved the operations plan.

When spring-run were salvaged, pumping was dialed back. Once the spring-run moved out of the area, pumping was ramped back up and there was no further salvage of endangered species at the pumps. Real-time data showed that few species were present in the Delta at this time.

This exercise of real-time flexibility reduced overall Delta outflow by about one percent and gained 15,000 acre-feet of water supply for the State Water Project, roughly enough to supply 45,000 homes for a year.

The experience reinforced that capturing additional water supply during high outflow periods when there are minimal risks to species is good water management.

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Trump is winning his water tug-of-war with Newsom

President Donald Trump and Gov. Gavin Newsom are in a race to capture as much water as possible in California — possibly even at each other's expense.

Politico | January 28, 2026 | Camille von Kaenel



The Friant-Kern Canal carries water diverted from Millerton Lake in Friant, California.

President Donald Trump and Gov. Gavin Newsom both want to squeeze water out of the state's sensitive main water hub. | Jae C. Hong/AP

SACRAMENTO, California — President Donald Trump and California Gov. Gavin Newsom are so in sync on California water that they're in a race to capture as much of it as possible — even at each other's expense.

Trump and Newsom's relative alignment on water issues has been good news all around for farmers and cities that draw from both sides of the state's main water hub: the federally run Central Valley Project, and the aptly named State Water Project, which is state-run.

Water deliveries have ticked up, mostly as a result of back-to-back wet years but also as a result of loosened environmental rules on both sides, much to the chagrin of environmental groups concerned about the collapse of endangered fish populations in the sensitive Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

But the feds have been steadily squeezing out more water over the course of the past year — to the point where state customers are getting worried that their own supplies could be in jeopardy.

“It’s on my radar,” said Jennifer Pierre, general manager of the State Water Contractors, which represents the 27 water agencies and 27 million people getting state supplies.

Karla Nemeth, California’s director of water resources, has already played out the scenario in which the state would have to reduce its own pumping to keep enough water flowing through the Delta for endangered fish if the feds took a lot of water: “We talk in real time about whether or not that has the potential to happen and how to avoid that happening,” she said.

“It gets tricky,” she added. “That’s where we have an actual harm to the State Water Project.”

In pre-Trump times, the state and federal sides of the projects operated in tandem, obeying the same pumping limits meant to protect endangered fish. But federal and state water managers have been following diverging rules since Trump’s first administration, when the Interior Department loosened its protections and the state sued. (Newsom has since ordered his own regulators to maximize water supplies, too.)

The situation worsened a year ago when federal officials ordered large releases from two Central Valley dams against established operating norms in an attempt to send water south for the Los Angeles fires, raising the prospect of chaos in the usually closely coordinated joint system of pumps, reservoirs and canals across the state.

Last month saw more divergence: Both state and feds gave their water managers more leeway over pumping, but the state still has to follow stricter environmental limits. The federal government’s more lenient rules allowed it to export roughly 24,000 more acre-feet of water than the state government during the first major storm of the water year in December, according to both state and federal water officials.

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum took a victory lap in a press release last week.

“The gains achieved over the past year demonstrate how a disciplined, mission-focused approach can expand water reliability for communities, agriculture and the economy,” he said.

Nemeth emphasized that state and water managers are still talking through operations daily. For example, during the first week of January, federal water managers determined that they could increase pumping without harm to fish populations, but the state declined to do so — and the federal government ultimately backed off, according to Bureau of Reclamation spokesperson Tara Jane Campbell Miranda.

State and federal water managers are both planning to appear at the State Water Resources Control Board this week to detail their latest pumping plans, and federal water managers and users are also gathering in Reno for an annual conference.

But Nemeth acknowledged angst among Delta users and advocates about a disconnect.

“This is a complex system where people already do not trust each other on their best day,” said Nemeth. “That’s the story of this political moment, anyway.”

The late December and early January storms, which cleared California of drought for the first time in a quarter century, are temporarily papering over the tension: With most reservoirs full, it’s less obvious if one party or the other may be losing out on potential supplies.

But that may not last as the weather forecast for the coming weeks remains mostly dry. Pierre criticized the state for missing an opportunity earlier this month to capture more storm flows for summer use.

“It’s frustrating that when we have significant water being released for flood control that we’re not even having a conversation about whether some of that water could be used to rebuild our storage,” Pierre said.

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Trump administration signs off on plan for California's biggest reservoir in decades
San Francisco Chronicle | January 23, 2026 | Kurtis Alexander,



A canal near the proposed site of the Sites Reservoir is seen in August 2022. The Interior Department has signed off on the plan to construct the reservoir. Carlos Avila Gonzalez/S.F. Chronicle

The Trump administration gave the OK for California's Sites Reservoir on Friday, clearing a major hurdle for what would be the state's largest water project in decades.

The proposed reservoir 70 miles northwest of Sacramento, which is also supported by Gov. Gavin Newsom, is intended to collect flows from the Sacramento River during wet years and store them for cities and farms during dry times. The \$6 billion facility would hold 1.5 million acre-feet of water, enough to provide for more than 3 million households annually.

Both the federal and state governments agree that water storage needs to be a top priority in an era of increasing droughts, despite other major differences between Sacramento and Washington under the current administration.

"President Trump made clear that federal water projects must deliver real results for American families," said Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum, in a statement. "This administration is getting it done in record time. The Sites Reservoir Project and the gains achieved over the past year demonstrate how a disciplined, mission-focused approach can expand water reliability for communities, agriculture and the economy."

Sites Reservoir is a locally driven venture that will serve roughly two dozen water agencies that are planning to fund and manage the facility in Colusa and Glenn counties. Santa Clara Valley

Water in the South Bay and Zone 7 water agency in the East Bay are among the partners. So are some of the state's largest urban and agricultural suppliers, as are the state and federal governments.

The "record of decision" issued by the U.S. Interior Department on Friday grants formal federal approval for the reservoir, with the agency having completed the required environmental review. The move also authorizes the federal government to fund up to 25% of the reservoir's cost.

The federal government, through the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, will be entitled to a share of the reservoir's water in proportion to what it pays toward the endeavor. The Bureau of Reclamation manages the Central Valley Project in California and supplies water to vast swaths of the state's farmland.

The state of California, through voter-approved water bonds, is expected to provide \$1.1 billion in seed money for the reservoir.

The balance will be paid by the local and regional water agencies receiving supplies.

Before moving forward with construction, the Sites Project Authority, which is managing the venture, still needs to nail down funding commitments from the participating water agencies. It also must secure water rights from the state so it can draw flows from the Sacramento River.

The hope is to break ground by next year.

The reservoir, which would flood a remote valley, is an off-site reservoir, meaning it wouldn't sit directly on a river but pipe in supplies from elsewhere. The design is intended to limit its ecological footprint, though many environmental groups and tribes worry the facility will harm salmon runs by siphoning too much water from the Sacramento River.

A lawsuit over the project's environmental impact was unsuccessful in halting the effort.

Assuming the project moves forward, the 13-mile-long Sites Reservoir would be the biggest reservoir built in the state since New Melones Lake in Calaveras and Tuolumne counties in 1978.

Officials with the Interior Department said their action Friday on Sites Reservoir was timed with the one-year anniversary of President Trump's directive to maximize the nation's water supplies.

"We're grateful to our federal partners, who have helped make this project possible and look forward to advancing Sites in the coming year," said Fritz Durst, chair of the Sites Project Authority Board of Directors, in a statement.

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Artificial Intelligence and California's Water

Public Policy Institute of California | January 26, 2026



It can be hard to escape the hype over artificial intelligence (AI) right now, especially if you live in California. Is it going to transform society for the better or destroy the world as we know it? And, critical to those of us working on water issues, what do these advances mean for efficient water use—and our jobs? Through a series of blog posts, we will explore how California might leverage AI to better manage our water resources, while mitigating the risks of this rapidly evolving technology.

AI isn't new to California water, but recent advances may be changing the game

AI refers to computers performing tasks that typically involve human intelligence, such as reasoning, problem solving, and learning. While AI has exploded in the last few years, some water managers have been using early AI since the 1980s.

One of the most popular types of AI for water is machine learning, in which models learn and adapt without explicit instructions. In California, the Department of Water Resources and the State Water Resources Control Board have applied machine learning models to a range of topics, from modeling salinity to predicting drought impacts. Environmental NGOs and even private startups have jumped in as well, developing models to identify sufficient flows for ecosystems and inform water allocation. These applications likely have just scratched the surface: numerous academic articles propose more ways machine learning models can support water management in California.

Newer types of AI—particularly large language models that power the AI chatbots like ChatGPT—are making many tasks in the water sector faster, more efficient, and more accessible to those without specialized expertise. For example, these tools can rapidly summarize information (including legal documents), write computer code, and retrieve, analyze, and visualize data. California water utilities are using machine learning models for a variety of applications, including detecting leaks and increasing operations efficiency. There are countless other applications for California water, and many are still being discovered.

Today's water data systems are often slow and clunky; some hail AI's ability to rapidly integrate and analyze large datasets as transformative, potentially enabling a new field of real-time hydrology. This could help regulators, operators, managers, and water users make better decisions based on the most up-to-date information about current or forecasted conditions.

Risks of AI need to be monitored and mitigated

While these new tools hold promise for advancing California water management, conversations are just beginning about AI's opportunities and risks.

First, AI is only as good as the data that it uses, and poor-quality data can lead to inaccurate or biased results. For managing water resources, long-term environmental datasets of temperature, streamflow, and rainfall are essential to getting good predictions. (As they say in computer programming, "Garbage in, garbage out.") Recent cuts to federal programs for monitoring and data collection could harm the efficacy and accuracy of AI's environmental predictions, including in California. There are data privacy concerns if water sector workers use AI on the job without proper precautions.

AI also can "hallucinate," such as citing publications that don't exist. And perhaps the most thorny challenge is that no one knows how AI reaches its answers, including those who built the systems. Building the data infrastructure, quality control, and trust in AI outputs is critical, especially as its use in the water sector becomes more commonplace.

Environmental implications of data centers

Finally, water and energy use by data centers, which house the computers that run AI models, has become an issue of growing concern. In California, the governor recently vetoed a law requiring data centers to disclose water use (often used for cooling), while signing a law to study the impact of these centers' electricity use.

Decisionmakers in California will increasingly be called upon to set policy shaping the future of AI and water, given its risks and environmental challenges (though that effort may be complicated by a recent executive order). Smart policies will be needed to ensure that AI has a positive impact on California water while minimizing the risks.

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