

2 congressmen seek momentum to build new reservoir

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Democratic Rep. John Garamendi, right, gestures as he discusses legislation he and Republican Rep. Doug LaMalfa, left, are proposing to study the cost of building a reservoir in the Sites Valley during a news conference near Maxwell, Calif., Wednesday, March 19, 2014. The proposed measure calls for a federal study of the costs of building a reservoir in a valley about an hour's drive north of Sacramento. The bill would not guarantee federal funding for the reservoir, which is expected to cost between \$2 billion and \$3 billion dollars. RICH PEDRONCELLI — AP Photo

MAXWELL, Calif. — Two members of California's congressional delegation on Wednesday called for building a new reservoir north of Sacramento, displaying bipartisan agreement on one potential solution to California's long-term water problems.

Democratic Rep. John Garamendi and Republican Rep. Doug LaMalfa held a news conference near the location of the proposed reservoir to announce their bill. It calls for accelerating an existing federal feasibility study to authorize construction of the Sites Reservoir in a valley near Maxwell, about an hour's drive north of the state capital. They hope construction can start by 2015.

The announcement came the same day a congressional committee gathered in Fresno to address California's short-term and long-term water needs in the wake of a historic drought gripping the state.

Sites, considered for decades and studied since the 1990s, is the largest of the proposed reservoir projects being discussed for California, drawing Sacramento River water through canals instead of disrupting the river flow outright. With a storage capacity of 1.9 million acre feet, it would be about the same size as the San Luis Reservoir near Los Banos.

The congressmen said that in times of drought, the reservoir could be tapped for more than 1 million acre feet of water. That would be enough to supply San Francisco's population 10 times over, according to the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based nonprofit that focuses on water and environmental research. But earlier estimates from the state and federal government are much lower, ranging from about 200,000 to 600,000 acre feet.

In order to avoid congressional opposition to earmarks, the bill will not guarantee federal funding for the reservoir, which the lawmakers say will cost between \$2 billion and \$3 billion, although they said federal money could be available later. Likely sources of money are local water districts that will benefit from the reservoir and a state bond that is being negotiated for the November ballot.

Garamendi and LaMalfa said such water-storage projects are crucial for supplying California's farms and its growing population, now at 38 million people.

"There's a world of hurt in these fields and in the orchards around us because we failed in the past to prepare for the inevitable drought," Garamendi said, gesturing toward parched ground and empty fields.

Asked what responsibility Gov. Jerry Brown, governor from 1975 to 1983 and since 2011, bears for water storage in California, both congressmen criticized Brown for prioritizing expensive infrastructure projects instead, including \$25 billion freeway-size water tunnels beneath the Northern California delta.

"I hope he'll see beyond the high-speed rail nonsense and beyond the Delta tubes and into the importance of building storage," LaMalfa said.

While attending the annual agricultural expo outside the state Capitol on Wednesday, Brown did not respond to a question from a reporter asking for a response to the reservoir proposal. Instead, he offered brief comments about the drought to those attending the farm fair that did not include creating new reservoirs.

"We're doing everything we can to respond to the drought. We're going to emphasize water conservation and water recycling and managing the water below the ground and above the ground," he said. "So that's the big topic today. We're in the middle of March, and it feels like July. And so we know what our work is."

Other water-storage projects under consideration include raising the Shasta Dam to increase California's largest reservoir's capacity and building a new dam on the San Joaquin River above Fresno, known as the Temperance Flats project.

Some groups question the value of costly reservoir projects that redirect water from fish and other wildlife. Peter Gleick, director of the Pacific Institute, said such an approach "worked fine when there was new water to be had and when we didn't care about the environment. But those days are over."

He called on government to focus resources on water conservation, wastewater recycling and improving existing water-storage projects.

"We waste a tremendous amount of water that we already collect at great expense," Gleick said.

Associated Press writer Juliet Williams in Sacramento contributed to this report.