

State needs to invest in Sites reservoir

By the Editorial Board

California must develop a modern water system and strategy that includes greater flexibility to deal with climate change and a growing demand for an unpredictable supply of water.

The proposed Sites reservoir on the west side of the Sacramento Valley fits into that system. It would be an important part of a broad portfolio that includes more wastewater recycling, stormwater capture, desalination, conservation and environmental protection.

After four years of drought and the thinnest snowpack in 500 years, El Niño storms predicted for this rainy season [won't end the water crisis](#), and Californians should not become complacent.

Sites reservoir would be partially funded by the \$7.5 billion water bond approved by voters last year. It would deliver benefits statewide by increasing water supply and, with proper management, [providing versatility in water delivery](#) for farms, cities and much-needed groundwater recharge. One of the more promising aspects of Sites is that a bloc of water would be allocated to the environment.

Created by two primary dams and nine saddle dams, Sites would store 1.8 million acre-feet of water off-stream from the Sacramento River. Operators would fill the reservoir by using two existing canals and a pipeline that would be built to divert Sacramento River water during high flows from large winter storms.

Located west of the town of Maxwell in the Coast Range mountains, the reservoir would inundate the Antelope Valley, home to about 15 family farms and cattle ranches.

Some families in the valley favor the reservoir, and say they are looking to the future of agriculture and see the need for additional surface water storage. Others oppose giving up land that has been in their families for generations, where their ancestors were born, where they farmed and where they died. Those concerns are understandable and not to be taken lightly.

The decision to fund Sites reservoir rests with the California Water Commission, which will divvy up \$2.7 billion of the water bond for projects to increase storage capacity, improve the operation of the statewide water system and provide benefits to the Delta ecosystem. The commission also must determine that the projects are “cost-effective.”

Sites would accomplish the first three objectives. Whether it's cost-effective would depend on the proposal to build the reservoir and who would pay the remaining costs.

Projects to be evaluated by the Water Commission fall into two categories: surface storage and groundwater recharge. Both have merit, both are debatable and both are politically charged. Projects that achieve surface storage and groundwater recharge, like Sites reservoir, should have an advantage when the commission begins allocating bond money in 2017.

Constructing Sites would cost \$3 billion to \$4 billion, only a portion of which would be covered by the water bond. Other financing would come from people who benefit: [farmers in the Sacramento Valley](#), farmers and cities south of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

[Congress should help pay](#), as should [environmental organizations](#). Proper operation of the reservoir would have downstream benefits for the Delta, waterfowl habitat and for fisheries.

In considering Sites, cost effectiveness will weigh heavily as the commission seeks to get the biggest bang for the buck, Sites would compete with other storage plans, including a Temperance Flat reservoir north of Fresno on the San Joaquin River.

Sites would provide a relatively modest amount of water to the state's system. During summer months, about 500,000 acre-feet of water from Sites would be available for Northern California farmers, for transfers south and for projects to recharge depleted aquifers.

But helping to tip the scale in favor of Sites, the reservoir would not require a dam on a river, and thus would not impede fish migration. Dams on rivers separate salmon from spawning grounds and have led to plummeting populations of the iconic fish.

Sites also would provide an environmental water account that could contribute to wildlife refuges along the Pacific flyway. Mainly, it would create flexibility in the water system when used in concert with water from Shasta, Oroville and Folsom lakes for the benefit of the Delta.

When salt water intrudes into the Delta, water from Sites could be released to flush the salinity back toward San Francisco Bay. By using water from Sites, cold water behind Shasta and Folsom dams would be saved for release when necessary for salmon survival.

Climate change coupled with the threat of fish species going extinct and an ever-growing population has upended the way California has managed water. Now, winter rain and snowpack slowly fill the state's reservoirs, then water is pumped south from the Delta to farms and cities.

This system for managing water no longer functions for our times.

California must create a water system that realistically deals with a changing climate, an environment in peril, a \$54 billion agriculture industry and 39 million people.

The \$7.5 billion water bond should be used to help create a water system for the future. The investment should include incentives for conservation, greater use of recycled wastewater, capturing stormwater and desalination.

Strategic surface water storage and groundwater recharge will balance the portfolio of water assets. In that mix, Sites reservoir would add flexibility and would be worth the investment.