

An aerial view looks north over the California Aqueduct and agricultural fields just east of Interstate 5 in Stanislaus County, near Crows Landing. The aqueduct is a critical part of the State Water Project that carries water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta to the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.
—Dale Kolke / California Department of Water Resources.

California's Water Plan: If Not Now, When?

By Anthony R. Fellow, Ph.D

The California Legislature faces a pivotal decision: Approve Governor Gavin Newsom's budget trailer bill aimed at expediting the Delta Conveyance Project (DCP) and secure the state's water future; or let the heart and veins of California's water system spiral to a fatal end.

California's water infrastructure, more than 60 years old, is ill-equipped to handle the increasing volatility brought by climate change and catastrophic threats, such as earthquakes, that could flood the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta with salt, damage the existing infrastructure and cut off Southern California's water supply for years.

Governors for years have proposed changes to the Delta, but such plans have failed to get the nod, causing millions of taxpayer dollars and permits to go down the drain. Newsom's plan is still alive despite the armies of environmental groups and misinformed legislators promising its demise. He proposes a 45-mile tunnel to modernize the State Water Project (SWP), safeguarding water delivery to 27 million residents and 750,000 acres of farmland. By capturing water during major storms and transporting it efficiently, the project aims to mitigate anticipated climate change effects. A California Department of Water Resources (DWR) 2023 report found that the existing SWP could see a 23% decline in delivery capability over the next 20 years, equivalent to nearly half a million acre feet of water, enough to supply 1.7 million households.

Why is this bill important for the San Gabriel Valley? The San Gabriel Groundwater Basin is dependent on 20% of its water from the SWP, which runs through the Delta. This water is a critical resource for the local water management plan as it is used to replenish the groundwater basin when local rain and snow is below average. The SWP helps maintain sustainable levels to ensure reliability.

Other benefits exist in the Newsom plan. For one, it will eliminate redundant administrative hurdles that have historically delayed critical infrastructure projects. By simplifying permitting and legal processes, the state can reduce costs and accelerate Delta conveyance completion, ensuring timely responses to water scarcity issues.

Yes, it is an expensive project costing \$20 billion, a significant investment. However, analyses suggest that the benefits — such as increased water supply and disaster protection — could yield \$38 billion in value. By acting now, the state can avoid more costly emergency measures in the future. It should be noted that the project will be funded by public water agencies in the Bay Area, San Joaquin Valley, and Southern California that receive water from the SWP, not through the state's General Fund and not by taxpayers. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, for example, recently approved an additional \$142 million for the project's planning phase.

A recent economic analysis shows this plan is more affordable than desalination, recycled water, stormwater capture, and conservation. In addition, a DWR cost analysis indicates that for \$1 spent on the DCP, California communities would receive \$2.20 in benefits, including reliable water supplies, climate change adaptation, and improved water quality.

The proposal is supported by more than 90 labor unions, business leaders, water agencies, and community organizations. They understand that the governor's plan would create thousands of well-paying jobs and advance economic resilience.

However, local environmental organizations tell us to use our resources to do more recycling and forget about the costly Delta project. The San Gabriel Valley recycles 97 percent of its water, and, frankly, we have little, or no water left to recycle.

While some environmental groups and Delta communities have raised concerns about the plan's impact on local ecosystems, the project includes commitments to habitat restoration and environmental protections. Moreover, the tunnel's design aims to provide high quality water for the 27 million people who rely on the SWP while meeting all water quality standards in the Delta.

Approving Gov. Newsom's trailer bill is a strategic move toward a sustainable water future for California. By modernizing infrastructure, streamlining processes, and addressing environmental concerns, the state can ensure reliable water access for generations to come.

Write or call your local Assemblymember and State Senator and tell them to support the Newsom's plan to advance the DCP — instead of waiting for a catastrophic event to force us to move ahead.

The question is, if not now, when? Should we wait for the next catastrophic earthquake to cut off water to Southern California?

University Professor Anthony R. Fellow, Ph.D. is a director on the Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District and represents the agency on the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. He resides in Monrovia.



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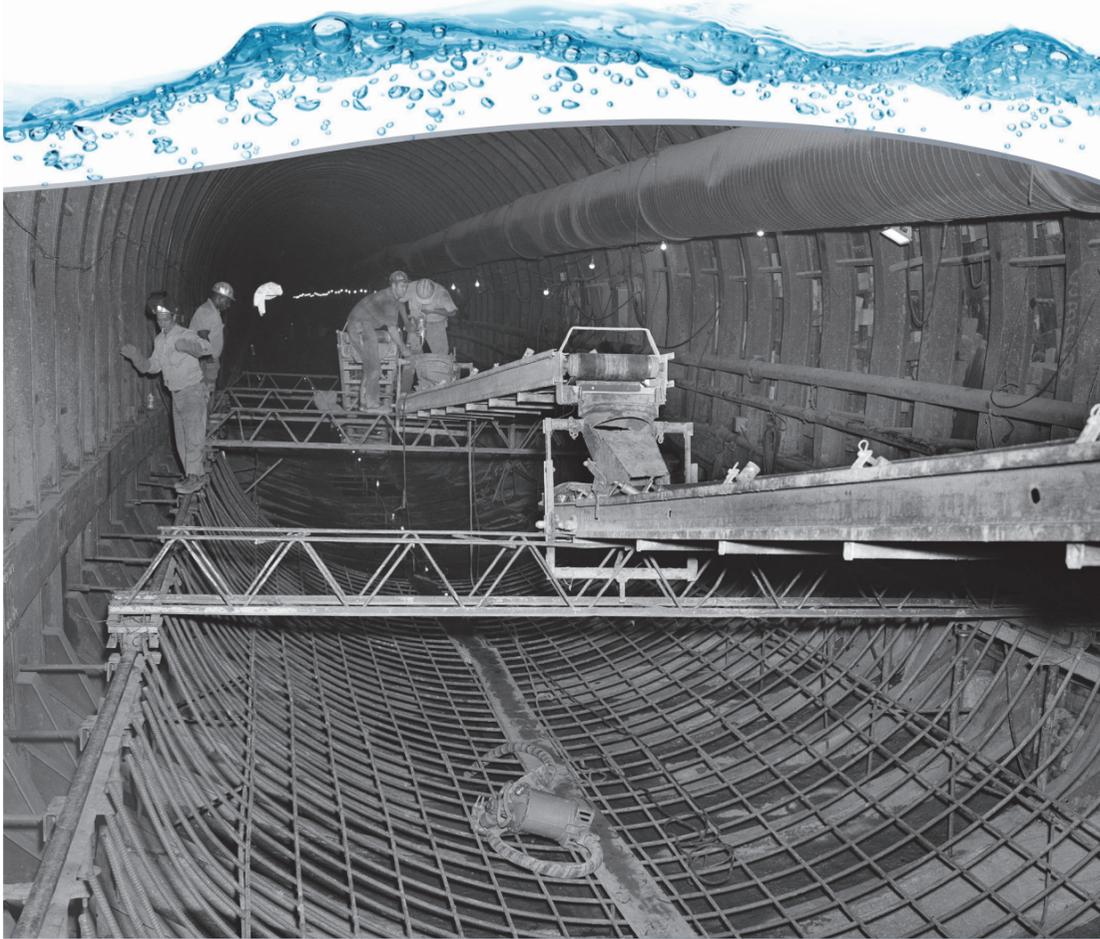
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Construction of the Angeles Tunnel on the West Branch of the California State Water Project, between Pyramid Lake and the future Castaic Powerplant in Los Angeles County. Photo taken September 20, 1967.
—California Department of Water Resources