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## Antelope Valley prime site for water

**It's 1 of 5 areas viewed by state for reservoirs**

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SITES – Bob Alvernaz gave up his San Francisco Bay Area cattle ranch 46 years ago as urban sprawl closed in.

Today, his ranch in a remote, picturesque valley 60 miles north of Sacramento is threatened by a different kind of development – a reservoir that could be the first built with state funds since 1975.

“I'm wondering if I should have gone out of state,” Alvernaz said.

From a hilltop on his ranch, up the road from the tiny community of Sites, the green Antelope Valley spreads out between a range of hills and the coastal mountains.

State and federal planners are looking at the valley as a prime site for a reservoir that would probably hold 1.8 million acre-feet of water, about half the capacity of Lake Shasta.

It's one of five water storage projects being investigated by the California Bay-Delta Authority, a consortium of 25 state and federal agencies that oversees efforts to improve the reliability of California's water supplies and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta ecosystem.

The others involve building a reservoir on the upper San Joaquin River at Temperance Flat, raising Shasta Dam 6 to 18.5 feet, turning bowl-shaped islands in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta into reservoirs and expanding the Contra Costa Water District's Los Vaqueros Reservoir.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's massive public works plan includes \$1.25 billion in bonds to help fund one or more of those projects, which

range in price from \$180 million for the smaller increase in the height of Shasta Dam to as much as \$2.4 billion for the Sites Reservoir.

Plans also call for federal or local funding for whatever projects are built.

Supporters say the projects would provide several benefits as California's population grows by an estimated 12 million over the next 25 years. These include setting aside water for dry years and creating space for flood control during wet ones.

Schwarzenegger included the money in the \$222.6 billion public works spending plan he announced in January. It is part of what he calls his "strategic growth plan" to upgrade highways, levees, prisons, government buildings and other public works projects.

The Sites and Temperance Flat reservoirs are the "most promising" of the five proposals, said Mark Cowin, head of the Division of Planning and Local Assistance for the state Department of Water Resources.

"The Sites and Temperance Flat projects could provide the most diverse set of benefits – water supply, water quality, ecosystem restoration and flood management – from a state and regional perspective compared to the other three," he said.

But environmentalists see serious problems with both and say the state could find more cost-effective ways to meet its water needs, particularly through more aggressive conservation.

They're concerned that Schwarzenegger's including the bond funds in his broader public works plan brings the projects closer to reality.

"We've gone from these ongoing studies that no one has paid attention to, to a bunch of people in fairly important positions in the administration and Legislature pounding the table and saying, 'We need to build storage now and here's money to do it,' " said Steve Evans, conservation director for Friends of the River, a Sacramento-based environmental group.

The Sites project could divert water needed to maintain salmon runs and riparian habitat along the Sacramento River, which also are Cal-Fed goals, Evans said.

It also would flood 14,000 acres of grassland and oak woodlands, jeopardizing habitat for dozens of threatened or endangered species, and produce water laden with metals and other pollutants, including methyl mercury, from the valley's soil, Evans said.

“I can't imagine they would be able to approve this without a legal challenge” from the environmental community, he said.

The Temperance Flat project would flood a federal recreation area and possibly a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. powerhouse while providing relatively little water for downstream use.

“It's the least cost-efficient dam project we could look at,” Evans said. “We've almost fully developed the San Joaquin and take something like 98 percent of its water to the point where it usually does not flow anymore.”

The Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based think tank, released a report last September that concluded that an aggressive conservation program could cut the state's water use in 2030 by as much as 20 percent below 2000 levels, even with projected population growth.

The report recommended a number steps, including phasing out agricultural water subsidies, especially for water-intensive crops, expanding use of water-efficient irrigation systems and setting tougher efficiency requirements for washing machines and dishwashers.

“We may need new reservoirs sometime in the future, but we don't need them now,” said Peter Gleick, the institute's president and a co-author of the study.

Cowin said conservation is a “vital part” of the state's water plan but said California also needs new reservoirs. The last ones finished by the state – Pyramid and Perris lakes in Southern California – were completed in 1975, although there have been locally funded projects built since then.

As far as environmental damage, “we have yet to identify any impacts that cannot be mitigated,” he said.

Van Tenney, general manager of the Glenn-Colusa Irrigation District, which serves about 150,000 acres of farmland in the Sacramento Valley, supports construction of the Sites Reservoir to aid a water system that he said is in

“literal gridlock” because of environmental requirements and other demands. But it may be difficult for the project to pass environmental requirements, he said.

Also, the amount of water available from Sites in any given year could be only about 300,000 acre-feet instead of 1.8 million because of difficulties involved in refilling it, particularly in dry years, Tenney said.

Some Republican lawmakers are demanding that funding for Sites Reservoir be included in any public works bond plan approved by lawmakers. Schwarzenegger had hoped to get at least one bond measure on the June primary ballot.

He is asking for legislation that would allow the state to sell a total of \$68 billion in bonds. The program requires voters to approve the bonds in a series of elections through 2014.