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Sites Reservoir Water Right Application Moves Forward

Maxwell, Calif. – The Sites Project Authority (Authority) received notification from the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) that the Sites Reservoir water right application has been deemed complete. Accordingly, the Sites Reservoir Project is moving forward to the next step in the process toward issuing a new water right permit for the project. A water right permit will provide the Authority legal authorization to divert water within certain conditions, for a specific purpose, and for use within a specified area. The Authority will be the State designated steward of the water right for the Sites Reservoir Project.

“We are excited to move into this next phase of the permitting process, which builds on the momentum we’ve had this past year,” said Jerry Brown, Executive Director of the Authority. “We welcome the public review of our work, and we are confident in our analysis that the Sites Reservoir Project can safely and reliably serve as a key component of new infrastructure to manage California’s water in light of our changing climate.”

Through the year-long application development process, the Authority prepared an extensive water availability analysis, more comprehensive than any other in California history. In addition to analyzing a specific scenario requested by the SWRCB, the analysis looked at six other water supply scenarios—ranging from historical conditions to climate change projections as far out as 2070—to determine how much water would be available to store in Sites Reservoir under a variety of hydrologic conditions. This highly technical work includes varying levels of conservatism to ensure cautious and thoughtful analysis.

The findings clearly demonstrate that there is water available to store in Sites Reservoir under a variety of conditions. Sites Reservoir can benefit the public while all other water uses including those serving environmental resources continue to be met.

“We have closely examined a number of scenarios and every analysis showed that there is water available that could be stored in Sites,” said Alicia Forsythe, Environmental Planning and Permitting Manager of the Authority. “This year is a great example. In 2023 alone—after multiple atmospheric rivers—roughly 700,000 acre-feet of water could have been stored in Sites Reservoir and saved for later use.”

As part of the permit process, the SWCRB is required by law to publish public notice of a water right application once it has been accepted and deemed complete. This notice begins a 60-day period whereby the public can protest the issuance of a water right permit for the Project on specific grounds, including alleged injury to prior rights, adverse impact on the environment, or failure to best conserve the public interest or public trust resources.

The 60-day public notice for the Authority application is the next step in the SWCRB’s process for issuing a water right permit for the Project. Through this process, a number of factors are considered, including potential injury to senior water right holders, potential environmental impacts, and potential adverse impacts to public trust resources. Finally, the SWCRB must find that unappropriated water is available to supply the Project and that the use of water is in the public interest; the State Water Board will issue a water right permit if they determine the Project meets these criteria.

Sites is an off-stream reservoir proposed north of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where it would provide unique water supply and environmental benefits during dry periods, especially during extended drought. Additional information can be found at www.sitesproject.org or on Facebook and Twitter at @SitesProject.