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Newsom scales back controversial Delta twin tunnels plan

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California's new governor drops Jerry Brown's plan, calls for one tunnel, smaller project



(Bob Pepping/Bay Area News Group Archives)

An aerial photograph shows Bouldin Island, 12 miles north of Stockton, in the foreground and Webb Tract in the background over the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. (Bob Pepping/Bay Area News Group Archives)

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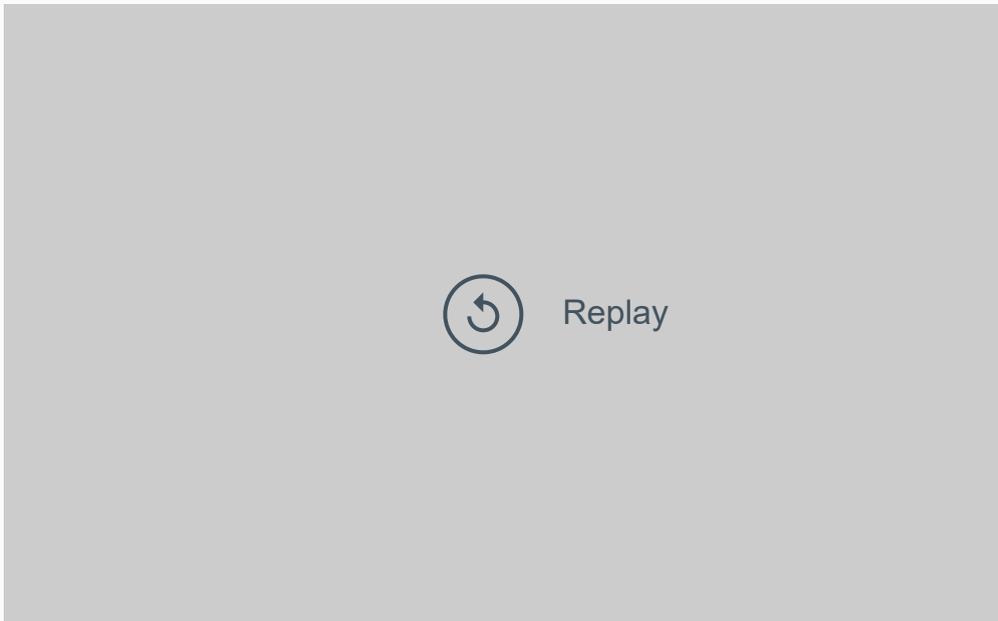
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In a major shift in one of the largest proposed public works projects in state history, California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Tuesday announced he does not support former Gov. Jerry Brown's \$19 billion plan to build two massive tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to make it easier to move water from the north to the south.

Newsom, in his first state-of-the-state speech since taking office last month, said he instead will pursue a smaller, one-tunnel plan for the project.

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“Let me be direct about where I stand,” Newsom said, adding “I do not support the twin tunnels. But we can build on the important work that’s already been done. That’s why I do support a single tunnel.”

Such a scaled-back project could cost roughly \$10 billion, according to estimates done by the state and water agencies last year. The decision was largely a victory for environmental groups and Delta political leaders, and a setback for Los Angeles water officials who had supported the plan.

The Delta tunnels plan was begun under former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. It called for building two tunnels, each 35 miles long and 40 feet high, under the Delta, the vast system of channels and sloughs between the Bay Area and Sacramento where the state’s two largest rivers, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin, meet before they flow into San Francisco Bay.

In 2009, the Department of Water Resources announced the project would cost





Source: California Natural Resources Agency

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The original idea was that the tunnels would take water from the Sacramento River, south of Sacramento, and move it to the huge pumps near Tracy that are part of the State Water Project and Central Valley Project. That, supporters say, would reduce reliance on the pumps and make water deliveries more reliable by protecting endangered salmon, smelt and other fish, which can be killed by the pumps. Court rulings now limit water pumping when the fish are migrating near the pumps.

But critics called the tunnels plan a huge boondoggle that would eventually allow large agribusiness interests in the San Joaquin Valley, as well as urban users in Los Angeles, to take more water out of the Delta, regardless of what promises are made now.

Environmental groups on Tuesday mostly cheered the news.

“We are grateful to Gov. Newsom for listening to the people of the Delta, and



Barrigan-Parilla said that her group will work with state officials now to improve Delta water quality and to promote regional “self-sufficiency” for water, meaning more local supplies rather than pumping water hundreds of miles across the state.

As for one tunnel, she said her organization will “re-evaluate” any new plan as details come out for its “merits and weaknesses.”

The Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Water District, which last year offered up to \$10.8 billion toward the project’s price tag — saving Brown’s plan when other water agencies were wavering over the cost — said it will work toward a smaller project now.

“While a single tunnel project will not resolve all pumping problems in the Delta and is less flexible for dealing with climate change impacts, it is imperative that we move forward rapidly on a conveyance project,” said Jeff Kightlinger, Metropolitan’s general manager.

“Having no Delta fix imperils all of California.”

Several large environmental groups have supported a one-tunnel project in the past as a way to provide flexibility and protect against a large earthquake disrupting the current system.

In 2013, some environmental groups, including the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Planning and Conservation League, Defenders of Wildlife and the Bay Institute, called for the state and federal government to study a one-tunnel project that would carry 3,000 cubic feet per second — an amount of water roughly one-third of the Brown administration’s twin tunnels project. The groups said the tunnel could potentially move significant amounts of water south in wet years, reducing the need to pump during dry years when salmon, smelt and other fish species are most at risk, without opening the spigot too wide.





The Clifton Court Forebay staging area south of Discovery Bay, Calif., in a 2006 photo. Gov. Gavin Newsom announced his plans to scale back the twin tunnels project through the Delta in his State of the State address Tuesday. (Bay Area News Group Archives) Bay Area News Group Archives

The issue split the board of the Santa Clara Valley Water District, the government agency based in San Jose that provides water to 2 million Santa Clara County residents, and which draws nearly half its supply from the Delta. In 2017, the district's board unanimously endorsed a one-tunnel plan. Then it reversed course last year on a 4-3 vote and agreed to support the two-tunnel plan and contribute up to \$650 million toward it after Metropolitan Water District increased its contributions and Brown lobbied hard.

“There’s a lot more to happen, but we’re happy to see the direction that Gov. Newsom taken, since it’s the direction we all wanted to go in two years ago,” said Linda LeZotte, chairwoman of the Santa Clara Valley Water District board.

What happens next isn’t clear.

Newsom did not explain what size the one tunnel would be, its configuration or cost. Any significant changes to the original plan are likely to require the state to draw up a new environmental impact statement, which could take years.

Newsom also said Tuesday that he supports a broad range of projects to help meet California’s future needs, including more recycled water and better efforts to recharge depleted groundwater in the Central Valley and elsewhere.

“We have to get past the old binaries, like farmers versus environmentalists, or



In another big announcement, Newsom also disclosed Tuesday he is not re-appointing Felicia Marcus as chair of the State Water Resources Control Board, a powerful agency that oversees water pollution, water rights and water conservation rules. During the state's five-year drought, she led efforts to expand water conservation, and more recently raised the ire of some farm groups and the city of San Francisco over plans to require more water be left in the San Joaquin River, and its tributaries, including the Tuolumne River, a main source of San Francisco's water.

Instead, Newsom appointed Joaquin Esquivel as the new chairman. Esquivel has been a board member since Brown appointed him in 2017. He was a former assistant state resources secretary for federal water policy in the Brown administration and before that was a staff member to former U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, for whom he worked on water and agricultural issues.

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