

Plan B to the Delta Tunnels

Long-lasting jobs and water security

by Conner Everts, Environmental Water Caucus

When asked about alternatives to the Delta Tunnels in December 2015, Governor Jerry Brown said, “I don’t think there is a Plan B.” This view was reflected in February 2016 by State Building and Construction Trades Council president Robbie Hunter who said the Tunnels are “...the only viable solution to protect the Delta environment and secure water deliveries.”

The power-brokers and concrete-pourers are united in claiming that California’s water security can only be achieved with a massive construction project that will cost \$17 billion, likely far more like the Bay Bridge.

But state and federal agencies now considering permits are not convinced the Delta Tunnels make sense.

The EPA called the Tunnels’ most recent Environmental Impact Report “inadequate” and issued a failing grade until better science is completed. A majority of the Santa Clara Valley Water District board members recently expressed serious reservations about the tunnels project, one citing the potential extinction of salmon and California’s salmon fishing industry, which generates \$1.5 billion in economic activity annually.

The truth is that there are numerous Plan Bs.

California’s political leaders could provide for water security and protect the San Francisco Bay-Delta by redirecting water investments into projects that improve regional water sustainability and create long-term jobs.

In our report, “ [A Sustainable Water Plan for California](#) ” the Environmental Water Caucus outlines cost-effective solutions to California’s emerging water needs that will protect the San Francisco Bay-Delta estuary in the process.

Here are some of our alternative proposals:

Jobs

Developing regional self-reliance is the best way to provide a more reliable water supply. This requires investment in water conservation, maximizing wastewater reuse and groundwater recharge, while capturing storm water and rainwater, gray water, and fixing leaky local pipes. Cleaning up aquifers and providing jobs for local water makes economic sense.

Dr. Jeffrey Michael, Director of the Center for Business and Policy Research at the University of the Pacific has pointed out that the investments in water conservation create 15 to 20 jobs per million dollars of expenditure, as opposed to the five jobs per million dollars of investment that is touted for the Delta Tunnels.

The Los Angeles-based nonprofit [Economic Roundtable](#) found that investments in water use efficiency reduce this region's water consumption and dependence on large, statewide water diversion projects that have adverse environmental impacts and create large numbers of jobs that pay sustaining wages and generate broad expansion in local business activity.

Southern California labor unions have expressed interest in mass deployment of gray water systems. The workers are ready for these investments.

Conservation

During the summer of 2015, urban water users throughout California beat state goals for water conservation during a drought. In Southern California many of these reductions will become permanent as lawns are removed, drip irrigation is installed, and people replace leaky toilets. [Mayor Garcetti](#) recently directed Los Angeles to permanently cut water use 20 percent by 2017.

Conservation costs just \$210 per acre-foot of water according to the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation. New conveyance and surface storage water projects cost between \$760 to \$2000 per acre-foot of water.

Water Recycling

In Southern California 2.7 million acre-feet of treated waste water is dumped into the ocean annually. This waste water could be used at least for irrigation. The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California [has plans](#) to build one of the largest recycled water programs in the world. Treating and reusing urban wastewater, gray water, and storm water can generate an additional 2 million acre-feet per year by 2030 and provide long-lasting jobs to the region.

The Water Replenishment District of Southern California recently unveiled plans for a [water purification plant](#) that would make the district entirely self-reliant on local water.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's [Urban Water Management Plan](#) for 2010 set a goal of using 35 percent less imported water in Los Angeles and has a detailed plan to achieve this goal.

Stormwater Capture

A 2014 [issue brief](#) by the Pacific Institute and the Natural Resources Defense Council found that stormwater capture in urbanized Southern California and the San Francisco Bay region has the potential to increase water supplies by 420,000 to 630,000 acre-feet per year and that rooftop rainwater capture could be used to increase water supplies by as much as 190,000 acre-feet per year, of which nearly 145,000 acre-feet could be gained via rainwater capture systems installed in our homes.

Agricultural Water Conservation

Because agriculture uses such a huge percentage of California's developed water, this sector offers the largest potential for conservation. According to the Pacific Institute, increasing irrigation technology, ending the irrigation of polluted farmlands, and instituting tiered price structures could reduce as much as five million acre-feet of water per year.

Key to understanding California's water "crisis" is the simple fact that irrigated agriculture on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley uses roughly 70 percent of the Delta's exported water and contributes less than 0.3 % to the state's economy. Big Desert agriculture has benefitted enormously from the taxpayer-subsidized water and their lobbyists exert profound influence over California water policy in Sacramento and Washington, DC.

Most of the water from the Delta Tunnels would serve large agricultural concerns like Stewart Resnick's "Wonderful" Company. Last November, a [Forbes Magazine](#) feature explained, " The Resnicks are already looking to secure additional water sources. The couple could score big if a \$15 billion water project championed by Governor Jerry Brown is officially approved in the next few years."

California agriculture made record-breaking profits in 2015, even during the drought. Their cries of impending doom are just not credible.

The California Constitution has a "reasonable use" doctrine for water and it is time for a cost-benefit analysis to be applied as to the best use of water from the Bay-Delta watershed.

Let's Implement Plan B

It is time to quit bickering over a decades-old plan for the Peripheral Tunnels that a recent [Hoover Institution](#) poll found only 33 percent of Californians support.

The Environmental Water Caucus believes the Tunnels Project should neither be approved, financed, built, nor operated. The Tunnels will accelerate deterioration of the Bay-Delta Estuary by starving it of freshwater flow. It will also starve California cities, counties, and local water agencies of resources that could fund local and regional water projects that deliver a far bigger bang for the buck.

Let's build regional water sustainability and create long-term jobs that will actually address the needs of all Californians, not just special interests with political clout.

Conner Everts is the facilitator of the Environmental Water Caucus, a coalition of statewide conservation, fishing, and tribal organizations advocating for equitable and sustainable California water resource use. He lives in Santa Monica.