

Hoping New Reservoirs Will Immediately Store More Water in California? That's Unlikely. | 1

Surface water storage has become a hot topic in California. The recent drought led voters in 2014 to approve California's Proposition 1 water bond, which, in part, earmarked \$2.7 billion for the public benefits of storage projects. It's very likely that at least some of that money will go to a large surface water storage project, although it could also fund

groundwater storage or conjunctive use projects.



Does it make sense to channel that pot of money to surface storage projects? There's been a lot of research and debate about the environmental impacts and cost effectiveness of surface water storage. But there hasn't been much consideration of their practical feasibility—in particular, the time required from project initiation to completion and the legal requirements that could expose problems with the storage facility plans.

To fill that gap, [a new Pritzker Brief](#) from the Emmett Institute reviews the legal risks and timelines associated with increasing surface water storage in California. It follows the eight large storage projects that have been investigated since 2000 through their environmental review and permitting processes. Only two of those projects have been built. Those two both expanded already existing storage facilities and still required about twelve years for permitting, approvals, and planning, followed by about two years for project construction. The other projects have required almost 15 years (and counting) for the permitting and analysis phase. And many of them face serious financial, legal, and political barriers that may block their approval and construction.

Our Brief explores these long timelines, which reflect the multiple assessments and permitting requirements necessary to ensure the feasibility, safety, and financial viability of

the storage facilities. As we found, many different laws and political/financial concerns contribute to the long timelines, meaning that there is no silver bullet for shortening schedules. And it would be inadvisable for other reasons to remove any of these requirements.

Long timelines for recent large surface storage projects suggest that future major projects will likely follow similarly lengthy schedules. The California Water Commission should explicitly account for the practical timelines and requirements for a project to move from proposal to completion as it decides how to allocate Proposition 1 funding among storage projects.