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# Editorial: Valley Water should kill costly Pacheco Dam project

Board cannot justify increased costs to ratepayers for the \$2.5 billion boondoggle



The Santa Clara Valley Water District has proposed building a 319-foot tall dam on Pacheco Creek in Southern Santa Clara County near Highway 152 and Henry Coe State Park. (Photo courtesy of Santa Clara Valley Water District)

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By **MERCURY NEWS EDITORIAL BOARD** | Mercury News

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The Santa Clara Valley Water District Board on Tuesday should kill its plan to build the Pacheco Dam project.

It cannot justify the increased costs to ratepayers for a new dam and reservoir

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The Pacheco project calls for a 319-foot-tall dam to be built north of Highway 152 near Henry W. Coe State Park. It would hold up to 144,000 acre-feet of water, replacing the current earthen dam that holds only 5,500 acre-feet of water.

The Pacheco project has never been considered a high priority by Valley Water staff. But the board has consistently pushed for the project despite there being far cheaper ways to get a better long-term supply of water for South Bay residents and businesses.

“This represents a very important supply system for the future,” said board member John Varela in January. “All of us should work toward completing this project, as long as it takes, and how much it ever costs.”

That’s precisely the kind of attitude that years ago earned the water district the nickname the “Golden Spigot.”

The district staff report notes that building Pacheco would cost \$18,800 per acre-foot of water. But constructing new groundwater storage banks in Fresno and Kern County could be accomplished for only \$400 to \$600 per acre-foot of water. And the cost of raising the height of the dam at Los Vaqueros Reservoir in Contra Costa County — a plan with virtually no opposition — could be built at a cost of \$8,300 per acre-foot of water.

Californians pushing for additional dams largely ignore the fact that the good sites have been taken.

Pacheco Creek and its surrounding watershed doesn’t get a lot of rain, even in rainy years. And the geology of the area carries high risks for earthquakes and landslides. A contractor earlier this year confirmed that the area has unstable rock. Test borings determined that crews would have to dig down at least 30 feet deeper to hit bedrock than had previously been thought.

That’s what caused water engineers to add more than \$1 billion to the estimated cost of the project. They also said it would add three years to the construction timetable. And that’s before the district receives its Environmental Impact Report for the project, which could easily boost costs even higher.

To its credit, the district and the board have been moving forward with efforts to increase water supplies through conservation and recycling. The board voted recently to double the amount of money it pays homeowners to replace their lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping, from \$1 per square foot to \$2. It also



The water district should also redouble its effort to increase groundwater storage and build on its program to capture gray water. Those are relatively cheap, environmentally sound ways of increasing the region's water supply.

The Pacheco Dam project is a boondoggle in the making. Kill it now before ratepayers get stuck with a project that won't help the region fight off the next long-term drought.

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