

California governor considers one-tunnel water plan

January 17 2018, by Ellen Knickmeyer

Gov. Jerry Brown's administration is proposing scaling back his troubled plans to redo California's water system, releasing a new plan that would build only one tunnel to ship water from Northern California instead of two, and put Southern and central California water agencies directly in charge of designing and building it.

The state posted the revised proposal late Friday on a state website that solicits bids for state contracts, saying for the first time that it was considering postponing one of the two tunnels indefinitely and asking potential contractors for engineering and other services to say how they would handle a one-[tunnel project](#) instead.

Lisa Lien-Mager, a spokeswoman for the state, said Tuesday that "no decision has been made to change the project."

Brown had been pushing to launch construction of two giant \$16 billion water tunnels to better secure water supplies for farms and cities to the south before he leaves office this year. The project, which would be California's biggest water project in decades, last year failed to gain enough support from local water agencies that would benefit from the project and pay for it.

Environmental groups have opposed the original twin-tunnel project, fearing Southern California water agencies would use the 35-mile (55-kilometer) tunnels to drain too much water from the Sacramento River, above its delta with the San Joaquin River.

The Sacramento is the state's biggest river and a vital supplier of fresh water to the San Francisco Bay, part of the largest estuary on the West Coast of the Americas.

Brown and other project supporters say the tunnel project would modernize California's current, outdated north-south delivery system, where pumps and overall water withdrawals are blamed for the steady dwindling of native fish and other wildlife that depend on delta water. Brown's father, then-Gov. Pat Brown, oversaw building of that water project in the 1950s and 1960s.

The revised state proposal talks of building the tunnels in stages, with one of the four-story-high tunnels built now, and the second tunnel at some unspecified time. The new proposal also would cut the number of intakes pulling water from the Sacramento River, from three to two.

Water contractors have previously said they were considering paring the project from two tunnels to one, in hopes of more easily winning support for a smaller project. The newly posted revised state proposal marks the first time the state has publicly put such a proposal in writing.

The state did not immediately release a revised cost for the scaled-down proposal.

Osha Meserve, an attorney working for Northern California farmers opposing the project, said the revised proposal makes "more clear the project they want to do is a failure. Now they're trying to morph into something else."

Scaling down to one tunnel would make the project more affordable. Also, some environmental groups that oppose the two-tunnel plan have been receptive to the idea of one tunnel, if it takes less water than a bigger project and is operated carefully.

Project opponent Restore the Delta said any one-tunnel project would require new environmental studies and applications. Another state water agency whose approval is necessary for the project, the state Water Resources Control Board, is watching the discussions on a possible scaled-down project, and would take any project changes under consideration, spokesman Tim Moran said.

Bob Muir, a spokesman for Southern California's giant Metropolitan Water District, the project's main backer along with the Brown administration, referred questions to the state and to an association of state water contractors.

Water districts choosing to buy into the project would manage the design and build of the tunnels, including choices on contractors, rather than the state's Department of Water Resources.

Lien-Mager, the state spokeswoman, said state water officials would retain "a strong oversight and supervisory role" over building of any eventual water project.

Metropolitan, which supplies water to almost half of California's 39 million residents, so far has been the main water agency to say a single tunnel could work, helping assure a more reliable [water](#) supply for its urban Southern California customers.

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