

Editorial: Brown should focus on water storage, not tunnels and trains

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Gov. Jerry Brown has a grand stage and likely has some time to kill in his State of the State address Thursday. We're here to help.

We urge the governor to spend some time talking about a topic that polls show the voters are interested in — drought and how to deal with it.

He can use current events as an illustration.

After a train of storms hit the north state this week, creeks and rivers flooded for the first time in years. It's a long time since riparian habitats got a good flushing and it's badly needed. The Sacramento River was full of algae and muck late this fall and early winter.

The floods are vital. Sloughs that provide valuable fish and wildlife habitat hadn't seen a fresh influx of water in months.

The river at Hamilton City topped out at 78,000 cubic-feet per second Monday evening. Just two weeks ago, it was in the 5,000 cfs range. Normal winter flows should be closer to that upper end.

Despite all of this water filling the Feather and Sacramento watersheds, there's the sobering fact that none of it helps alleviate California's historic drought. Our state's inadequate plumbing system means none of these floodwaters below Oroville and Shasta lakes are captured. It all flows under the Golden Gate Bridge.

Californians are concerned. A poll conducted by Stanford University's Hoover Institution and released last week asked Californians about the state's priorities. They don't jibe with Brown's.

It's not the bullet train. It's not climate change.

The poll said tackling the state's water problem should be the state's top priority. Three-quarters of the people polled Nov. 30 to Dec. 13 agreed. High-speed rail was at the bottom of respondents' list of top priorities for 2016.

In fact, 53 percent of residents said they would support a ballot measure that would use the bullet train's billions for dams and reservoirs instead.

Brown can avoid that argument by expressing his support for Sites Reservoir, just west of Maxwell.

The governor has vaguely said he supports more water storage but has never committed specifically to Sites, which is the best water storage project out there for several reasons. Among them: It's far along in the study process, it wouldn't dam any existing rivers, and it has benefits for multiple users downstream, including the delta.

Brown can point to the current storm flows as evidence that Sites could be filled in a normal winter during high-water events for use in the summer when the state is parched.

We've been supporters of the Sites project for years. Last month, the Sacramento Bee added an important endorsement of Sites. It's important because the Bee once won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of editorials about removing a dam (Hetch Hetchy). Now here it was advocating for a new reservoir.

It shows you how much the project makes sense.

With the California Water Commission in the process of deciding where to spend voter-approved bond money to build new reservoirs, Brown's endorsement would be both wise and helpful.

Unfortunately, the governor is still more focused on his twin tunnels. Last week in a meeting of the Association of California Water Agencies, he said the tunnels to send water south of the delta were "absolutely necessary." He didn't mention where this extra water would come from. He didn't mention Sites. He still hasn't been able to explain how sucking water out of the delta would be more environmentally friendly to the delicate ecosystem than letting the water flow through it.

The case for the twin tunnels is illogical to all except the San Joaquin Valley's ill-placed cities and mega-farms. The case for Sites Reservoir is obvious. Brown needs to send a message to Californians that he's willing to address their concerns about water storage and can use the water flowing by the capital city as the perfect illustration.