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Hetch Hetchy upgrade approved by SFPUC

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The largest water project in the western United States — a multibillion-dollar plan to upgrade The City's water system that aims to ensure a reliable supply for 2.4 million Bay Area residents until 2030 — took final shape Tuesday.

The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission signed off on the project's first comprehensive blueprint, which lays out a \$4.3 billion price tag, a 2015 completion date and general plans for more than 75 separate dams, tunnels, pumping stations and other upgrades.

Susan Leal, the general manager of the SFPUC, said the vote was significant because it signaled all of the major stakeholders in the project — environmentalists, regional water customers and The City — finally appear to be on the same page.

“You had participation and support from our partners — our wholesale water customers and the environmental community,” Leal said. “We've been at odds with some of these groups in the past. It was a lot for them to say ‘we approve.’”

The project will focus on hardening the aging Hetch Hetchy water system against a major earthquake, improving its capacity and reliability. Studies have shown a large temblor could knock out the system for as much as 60 days. It carries water 167 miles from the Hetch Hetchy Valley in the Sierra to four counties in the Bay Area, including San Francisco and San Mateo.

The commission eliminated what likely would have been the most controversial aspect of the project — a 47-mile pipeline that would have carried water across the San Joaquin Valley. Environmentalists feared the pipeline could be used to suck extra water off the Tuolumne River, causing damage to a fragile ecosystem in that area.

The commission dropped the pipeline because its cost increased 44 percent to \$986 million. SFPUC officials said in the past the pipeline was needed to carry water when repairs were being made on other San Joaquin Valley pipelines, but a consultant found recently that a cheaper set of crossover pipes, a shorter pipeline and other improvements could meet the same goals.

The decision pleased environmentalists, who would likely have sued to stop the pipeline from being included in the project.

“This is a prudent thing to do and the best way to move the project forward,” said John Rizzo, a member of the San Francisco chapter of the Sierra Club. “It has the potential to do the most damage.”

Environmentalists and residents who rely on the water system did not raise major objections to the project, but did question the environmental impact of certain aspects and whether the SFPUC could deliver the massive undertaking on time and on budget.

They were particularly concerned about taking extra water off the Tuolumne River and a project to put an inflatable dam on Alameda Creek in the East Bay, as it might affect steelhead salmon.

“By taking up to an extra 25 million gallons of water a day, it will be devastating for the Tuolumne River,” said Heather Dempsey of the Tuolumne River Trust.