

S.F. panels OK \$4.4 billion Hetch Hetchy upgrade

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A \$4.4 billion upgrade program to safeguard the Bay Area's largest drinking water system from drought or a catastrophic earthquake was approved today by both San Francisco's planning and public utilities commissions, despite opposition from some environmental groups.

The approval of the program's environmental report marked a key step in advancing a series of projects that San Francisco Public Utilities Commission officials say is necessary to keep the system functioning after a major temblor. The program includes digging a 5-mile tunnel under the bay for water supplies and replacing a seismically unsafe dam at the Calaveras Reservoir.

The program involves 85 individual projects, including laying sections of redundant pipeline, to maintain water supplies for the city Public Utilities Commission's 2.5 million customers in San Francisco, Santa Clara, Alameda and San Mateo counties. The water comes primarily from the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in Yosemite National Park.

The aging water system cuts across five active fault lines and could be severely damaged in a serious earthquake, SFPUC officials warn. Earlier this week, water was clearly visible squirting from a chronic leak on a 1920s-era pipeline that runs on sagging wooden trestles above wetlands near the Dumbarton Bridge.

Opposition to the program comes primarily from environmental groups that support the seismic upgrades but don't want to see additional water diverted from the Tuolumne River or Alameda Creek. They fear such diversions and other program elements will harm steelhead trout and other wildlife. Also, some municipal water customers, like the cities of San Jose and Santa Clara, are concerned about whether the plan will ensure adequate long-term water supplies.

The program calls for diverting up to an additional 2 million gallons of water a day off the Tuolumne River during periods of drought. That's far less than the original proposal of diverting an extra 35 million gallons a day.

The difference will be made up from tapping groundwater sources and various conservation measures, including using recycled water for San Francisco municipal golf courses and parks, SFPUC General Manager Ed Harrington said. The city Board of Supervisors also will be asked to set requirements on low-flow toilets, shower heads and faucets, Harrington said.

Opponents of the current proposal have 20 days to appeal Thursday's approval of the environmental report to the Board of Supervisors. About 20 individual projects within the program will require their own individual environmental assessments. The projects are scheduled to be completed by 2014.

Several environmental advocates said they are undecided on whether to appeal.