



Hetch Hetchy pipeline upgrade nears approval

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Improving delivery: A project to replace an aging pipeline in the Bay that provides water to The City and Peninsula would link to another project at Crystal Springs. Cindy Chew/The Examiner **SAN FRANCISCO** – San Francisco is poised to move forward with one of its most expensive capital improvement projects to date: the \$4.4 billion seismic upgrade of the Hetch Hetchy system, which provides water for 2.6 million people in San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara and Alameda counties.

The next step is to receive approval from the Planning Commission for the project's environmental-impact report, which is expected to be discussed Thursday.

The system includes a 167-mile stretch of pipes that begins at the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in the Sierra Nevada. The retrofit plan encompasses some 85 separate projects along the route. The Public Utilities Commission, which oversees the regional water system, is paying for the projects by issuing revenue bonds, financed through increased water rates.

One project, for example, will replace two pipelines crossing San Francisco Bay near the Dumbarton Bridge. Every gallon of San Francisco's drinking water passes through those tubes, which date back to the 1920s, yet they spurt water into the Bay daily. The new "bullet-proof" pipeline will carry enough water to compensate for the aging tubes. It will be placed 50 to 70 feet under the Bay floor, the first tunnel to do so, according to Project Manager Joe Ortiz. The tube, which is expected to cost more than \$300 million, connects to another project on the Peninsula, a second pipeline connecting to the Crystal Springs Reservoir. The pipeline addresses both seismic needs and an estimated increase in water consumption in the coming decades.

Although San Franciscans endorsed the project in 2002 when they approved a bond measure to update the water system, environmentalists say elements of the upgrade threaten wildlife and habitat.

For example, fish are at the forefront of a battle to rebuild the crumbling dam at the Calaveras Reservoir — part of the Hetch Hetchy system — in the Sunol Valley. Although Public Utilities Commission officials say they have worked to mitigate the problem, organizations like Friends of Alameda Creek are not content, according to the group's director, Jeff Miller.

Another group, the Tuolumne River Trust, says the program includes a controversial plan to divert up to 25 million more gallons of water per day from the river to meet demand projections; utilities commission officials counter that amount was decreased to 2 million to address habitat concerns. If planners approve the eight-volume environmental-impact report, which received more than 1,300 comments, critics can still appeal the decision.