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ENVIRONMENT

Will California ever build the Delta tunnel? Major battles ahead as Newsom era nears end



BY RACHEL BECKER
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Flowers bloom on a ranch leased by Duane Martin for cattle grazing in the Delta region of Sacramento County, southwest of Elk Grove, on April 22, 2026. Martin said the land and his cattle business would be negatively affected by the Delta Conveyance Project. Photo by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

IN SUMMARY

- California's Delta tunnel largely cleared a key hurdle last week — but far bigger obstacles still stand in the way.
- Among the next battlegrounds: the state's largest agricultural recycled water project and a cattleman's pasture.

In what Gov. Gavin Newsom hailed as a major milestone, his \$20 billion Delta tunnel largely cleared another chokepoint last week — but it still faces obstacles of a different magnitude.

For more than [half a century](#), California's leaders have debated rerouting water around, rather than through, the network of rivers, farmland and marshes of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Newsom's version would pipe Sacramento River water through [a 45-mile bypass](#) to a reservoir on the California Aqueduct, in an effort to shore up state supplies and send more water south.

Delta communities call the plan a water grab that would devastate one of the country's largest estuaries and [destroy towns, wildlife and generational farms](#). State officials and major water suppliers say it's necessary to safeguard water for two-thirds of Californians against the threats of climate change and natural disasters.

Tasked with refereeing the fight, a state agency called the Delta Stewardship Council weighed opponents' many challenges to the project and last week voted [six-to-one](#) to require the Department of Water Resources to address just two of them.

Newsom [declared victory](#), saying “we are closer than ever to seeing this important piece of infrastructure completed.”

Maybe closer than ever, California water watchers say, but still far from complete. Far bigger obstacles loom: court rulings that have upended California's financing plans, critical water rights decisions still to come from state regulators, and water agencies that have yet to decide whether the tunnel's water will be worth the cost.

“These are all existential,” said Jeffrey Mount, a senior fellow at the Public Policy Institute of California. “You've got some pretty tough hurdles ahead.”

A dying Delta

The Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is the heart of California's nature-defying water systems, where state and federal pumps send Northern California river water coursing to cities and farms in the lower half of the state.

The Delta is [collapsing under the strain](#) — wracked by algal blooms, degraded water quality and fish species spiraling towards extinction. Residents, environmentalists and [the fishing industry](#) fear that diverting freshwater through a tunnel will push it over the edge.

Voters [beat back](#) the first-generation tunnel — a peripheral canal — in the 1980s, during Gov. Jerry Brown's first stint as governor. But governor after governor has [continued the push](#). The canal eventually became the twin tunnels that became Newsom's Delta Conveyance Project, which remains mired in planning.

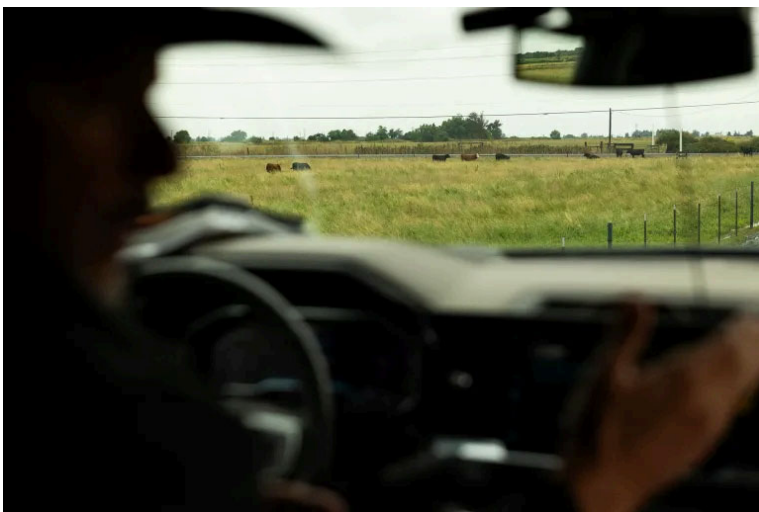
Carrie Buckman, environmental program manager for the tunnel project at the Department of Water Resources, is optimistic that construction could start as soon as 2029 and would last around 13 years.

But with Newsom in his [last year as governor](#), the clock is ticking. And the region's residents continue in limbo — bracing for a project that would carve through their communities, farms and waterways.

“Nobody seems to care about the people out here on the ground,” said Duane Martin Jr., a third-generation cattleman in the Delta.



Duane Martin stands on April 22, 2026, near the Sacramento County pasture, southwest of Elk Grove, where he has grazed cattle for 20 years, and where California water managers plan to build a major construction complex for the Delta tunnel. Photo by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters



Martin, a third-generation cattleman, bought his first cows when he was 10 with money he borrowed from his grandfather. Now, his daughters' cattle graze in the pasture outside his Delta home. Photos by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

Martin steered his pickup down country roads, along the orchards and pastures of Sacramento County. Great egrets strutted the edges of fields to snatch small, struggling creatures from the grass, and red-winged blackbirds clung to golden stalks of mustard.

Martin worries for his cattle operation. His father was a cattleman. His grandfather was a cattleman. Now a father himself, his daughters' cattle graze in the pasture outside his home.

He's outraged by the prospect of the truck traffic, the noise, the churn of the concrete batch plant and the roughly 200-acre pile of tunnel muck planned for land where he's been grazing cattle for decades.

But more than that, he said, gruff beneath his Stetson, "It's the community that they're going to impact — those of us that have lived here most of our lives."

"They're going to change the Delta area forever."

An unending water war

The Delta's vulnerability is real: levees are at risk of crumbling under age, earthquakes and climate-fueled storms; sea level rise threatens to flood the system with too much saltwater.

For Buckman, it's simple: As climate change makes California's swings from wet to dry more extreme, "It's about water supply."

Mount, like the water suppliers supporting the project, believes construction is inevitable. "If you don't build it in this generation, you'll build it in the next," he said. "Build a tunnel, or start a very painful process of really cutting back on water supplies from the Delta."

The costs are high; around [\\$20.1 billion](#) by the Department of Water Resources' estimate, [\\$60 to more than \\$100 billion](#), by an economic assessment commissioned by opponents.

California doesn't yet have a way to pay for it. State water managers planned to issue revenue bonds, to be paid back by water agencies receiving water from the tunnel — and their customers.

But a trial court said that the water code did not give the Water Resources "carte blanche to do as it wishes" and the financing plan "exceeded its delegated authority." The Third District Court of Appeal agreed, and in April, the California Supreme Court [refused to review the case](#).

Buckman said that the department still plans to issue bonds and is figuring out its next steps.

As yet, no water agency has committed to paying for a tunnel — and no agency likely will, until the department can finance it, according to Kelley Taber, an attorney representing tunnel opponents.

The federal government and the powerful irrigation districts it supplies have already opted out, Buckman said.



The Delta community of Isleton, visible from the banks of the Sacramento River on April 1, 2025. Photo by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

“Ag, at large, cannot afford to pay for large infrastructure projects,” said Jennifer Pierre, general manager for the State Water Contractors, an association of public water agencies that receive water from California’s massive delivery system, the State Water Project. But she said the costs don’t diminish the need.

That leaves the bulk of the bill with urban water suppliers and their customers.

Metropolitan Water District, the Southern California water import giant that supplies half the state's population, is already paying nearly half the tunnel's planning costs — but it's also [heavily investing](#) in local recycled water supplies.

Its board isn't expected to vote on whether to shoulder much of the tunnel's construction costs [until 2027](#). No construction commitment before then means no commitment before a new governor takes office.

Meanwhile, major water rights questions remain unresolved.

State regulators are [holding hearings](#) that could last through the summer about whether to allow the Department of Water Resources to divert Sacramento River water into the proposed tunnel intakes.

Newsom has [advocated for a Delta tunnel](#) since his first days as governor. Four Newsom appointees sit on the seven-member Delta Stewardship Council that just advanced the tunnel project, minus a couple speedbumps. He has also championed unsuccessful legislative fixes to [financing and other roadblocks](#).

The question is whether the next governor will continue the push. Pierre said they must — the need for the tunnel is clear.

Mount isn't as sure. It will depend on the next governor's priorities — and who they put in key leadership positions.

“Whoever they appoint, that is really where it happens,” he said. “It's hard for me to imagine that if Brown and/or Newsom weren't all in on this, it would have gotten this far.”

‘They’re gonna have to take it’

Martin pulls his pickup to the side of the road next to a lush pasture he leases that's more prairie than Pacific. This is one of the next battlegrounds for the tunnel project.

In the spring and summer, Martin grazes hundreds of cows and their calves here. And in the winter, the Sacramento Area Sewer District plans to pipe recycled water onto the fields, creating seasonal feeding grounds and rest stops for the [protected](#) sandhill crane and [other birds traveling the Pacific Flyway](#).

It's part of the largest agricultural recycled water project in the state, [Harvest Water](#), to provide highly treated wastewater to 16,000 acres of farmland in the region and take the pressure off local groundwater supplies.

California has already awarded more than \$400 million for Harvest Water, but the funding hinges on the environmental benefits like habitat the project will provide, according to the sewer district’s Jofil Borja. It’s an ideal spot, between the Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and the Cosumnes River Preserve.

And that’s where it runs up against the tunnel project. The pastures where Martin grazes his cattle and the sewer district plans to create seasonal habitat are also in the Department of Water Resources’ sights. State water managers plan to build a nearly 600-acre construction complex — with a permanent 214-acre mound of excavated tunnel materials up to 15 feet tall — [right here](#).



First: A sign for the Sacramento Area Sewer District, which is working on a major recycled water project to irrigate farmland and create wildlife habitat in the Delta. **Last:** A barn and metal corrals on a ranch leased by Duane Martin for cattle grazing in the Delta region of Sacramento County, southwest of Elk Grove, on April 22, 2026. Photos by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

“You tell me if you want to be the neighbor that lives right there, lookin’ out his front yard at this pile of muck,” Martin said, gesturing at a house across the road. Right now, its view is a sea of grass that disappears into a darker line of trees.

In refereeing the fight over this land, the Delta Stewardship Council last week ordered the Department of Water Resources to resolve its conflicts with Harvest Water over the site, or explain why that isn’t possible, [the council’s staff report said](#).

Kelley Taber, the attorney representing the sewer district, is celebrating the mixed victory.

“I always thought that this was going to be (the department’s) Achilles heel,” Taber said. Among the “multitude of disastrous impacts to the Delta,” she said, it’s “the most obvious fatal flaw.”

Buckman disputed staff’s assessment of the siting conflict in a letter to the council, saying that the tunnel project can’t avoid the entire Harvest Water footprint, and that the habitats don’t exist yet. But, she added, the department would “work promptly” to address the issue.

If it does, to the council’s satisfaction, state water managers will still need to buy or seize the land. The landowner declined to speak on the record.

Martin expects it will be a fight — and he’s ready for it. Under eminent domain, the state can forcibly take property for a public purpose. The landowner can contest it. But he’s unlikely to stop it.

“They’re gonna have to take it,” Martin said. “I’ve got a lot of friends that leave, but I ain’t about to quit. I’m a fighter, and I’m going to stay here and fight for it to the death.”

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