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Editorial: The pendulum shifts

State to lead a Hetch Hetchy study

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Yosemite National Park's Hetch Hetchy Valley is going to get the careful rethinking about its future that it deserves. An idea that not so long ago was far beyond the bounds of political convention - to drain San Francisco's 81-year-old reservoir in this magnificent valley and store the Bay Area's water elsewhere - has piqued the interest of a most unconventional leader: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Mike Chrisman, head of the California Resources Agency, sent the signal for the governor by writing two key state Assembly leaders and accepting their request to lead a comprehensive study of Hetch Hetchy. The letter arrived in the Capitol via U.S. mail. There was no press conference, no photo opportunity in Yosemite National Park, no grinning governor (he was off in Japan). The low-key style, and high-substance letter, was precisely what this debate needs. It breathes legitimacy into the idea of retooling a water system and reclaiming an irreplaceable landscape while addressing the state's broader water challenges.

"California, faced with significant water demands, needs a net increase in water storage capacity, not a decrease. Any plan to remove or modify existing water storage systems would need to be balanced by a viable alternative plan to, at a minimum, replace the water supply now provided by the Hetch Hetchy reservoir."

Agreed.

The letter arrived just hours after the Assembly's key champion of a Hetch Hetchy study, Lois Wolk of Davis, held a briefing for legislative staffers who were trying to get their arms around an issue that hasn't changed very much since 1913, when Congress allowed San Francisco to build this dam in the national park and submerge the smaller twin of Yosemite Valley.

This was a rainy November morning when the halls of the state Capitol are typically empty. Yet hearing room No. 127 was packed, San Francisco's paid lobbyists standing with their arms crossed at the door, as Wolk urged the staffers to keep an "open mind." Researchers from UC Davis and Environmental Defense then went about detailing their separate studies that showed how different reservoirs, both existing and proposed by San Francisco, can store this same supply.

The dam is a small portion of the overall Tuolumne River/San Francisco storage system that benefits the Bay Area. But Hetch Hetchy, one of nature's perfect and pristine granite bowls, holds the ultrapure water that San Franciscans have grown accustomed to drinking. Laws to keep the public away from the reservoir (it is a federal crime to wade in Hetch Hetchy) keep

it so pure. But these same Hetch Hetchy restrictions, and this reservoir have made the valley the least visited feature in the national park.

An open mind doesn't seem to be the norm when it comes to this subject, as the body language and whispers in the hearing room attested. The room clearly had its share of sentimentalists, concrete devotees and San Franciscans clinging to the mystique that what Congress did in 1913 can't possibly be undone today. Today, the dam is still there, and to restore the valley, punching a large hole at its base and leaving the rest of the structure intact would suffice. But gone is the ability to dismiss the idea of restoring Hetch Hetchy as a far-fetched fantasy.

The Hetch Hetchy evaluation process outlined by Chrisman is both pragmatic and true to the possibilities. The state (ideally with the help of the river users from San Francisco, Modesto and Turlock) seeks to calculate the value of restoring the valley as well as the costs of restructuring the water system, all impacts considered and addressed. More reliable supply, not less. More storage overall, not less. This process is going to take some time. But, finally, this debate has time on its side. It has a governor and a bipartisan coalition in the California Assembly that seems ready to navigate the course, wherever the findings may lead them.

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