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## Editorial: Left-wing conspiracy?

### Restoring Yosemite is not a water scheme

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Try having a conversation with someone who's hyperventilating. It's not easy.

Take the San Francisco Bay Area leaders. They are having a hard time swallowing how some legitimate questions arise from a water plan they crafted. One question, underscored Monday by an Environmental Defense study, is whether they need to keep a spectacular valley, Hetch Hetchy, under water in Yosemite National Park.

When the gasping subsides, a little patience is in order. And a little history.

San Francisco built a dam that submerged Hetch Hetchy in 1923 to supply water and electricity to the Bay Area. While millions of tourists annually crowd into Yosemite Valley, few visit the waterfalls and granite cliffs of its twin, Hetch Hetchy Valley, because of the dam.

Are there new alternatives that would allow Yosemite to get its valley back? San Francisco's water plan raises one possibility.

San Francisco is studying whether to build a reservoir even larger than Hetch Hetchy much closer to the Bay Area in the Calaveras hills. It would store more than a year's supply of water and could very well render the Hetch Hetchy dam expendable.

That is the conclusion of Environmental Defense, a conservation group that hired some of the state's top water experts to examine the issue. On Monday, the group unveiled 275 pages of data and findings, hoping to start a serious dialogue about Hetch Hetchy.

Two Bay Area leaders had their minds made up and press releases at the ready.

"This is no time to destroy an important source of water," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, as if the supply itself is somehow at risk. It is not.

"Environmental groups and Southern California are conspiring to pry away the Bay Area's hold on its water supply," said the Bay Area Council's Jim Wunderman. "Today's study release ... is just one small step in this quiet, plodding effort."

Why would respected leaders brush off Environmental Defense, when the merits of an impressive study are worth discussing? The Hetch Hetchy dam is upstream on the Tuolumne River from a reservoir nearly six times as large. That reservoir is New Don Pedro, and it rests over existing pipelines to the Bay Area. Environmental Defense experts studied how to maximize the use of New Don Pedro, and the proposed new reservoir in Calaveras.

The findings boil down to this: Storing and drawing water from these two reservoirs - New Don Pedro and Calaveras - could solve 97 percent of the Bay Area's future water challenge. Sound far-fetched, particularly using New Don Pedro for storage? Consider that San Francisco has been storing water in New Don Pedro through a complex water exchange arrangement with its owners, the Modesto and Turlock irrigation districts, for 33 years.

The Environmental Defense findings echo those of a previous computer analysis by the University of California, Davis. They both point to the conclusion that the Bay Area needs this Yosemite supply. They both question, however, the future need of storing the water in the national park.

The political hyperventilating could be eased with a steady flow of dispassionate facts. The only respected, independent source is the state. That is why two Northern California legislators with a special interest in water -Assemblyman Joseph Cansamilla of Pittsburg and Lois Wolk of Davis -reiterated their call for a state study on Monday. They await a response from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and his water leader, Lester Snow.

Nobody is asking the Bay Area to give up any water. Nothing horrible is about to happen. Something magnificent might happen that would restore a valley in a national park. A serious conversation is appropriate for the future of a national public asset.

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