

The massive infrastructure projects of the 1960s wouldn't work today

When people thought infrastructure could solve the arid West's water problems.

[Ryan Christopher Jones](#) September 11, 2026

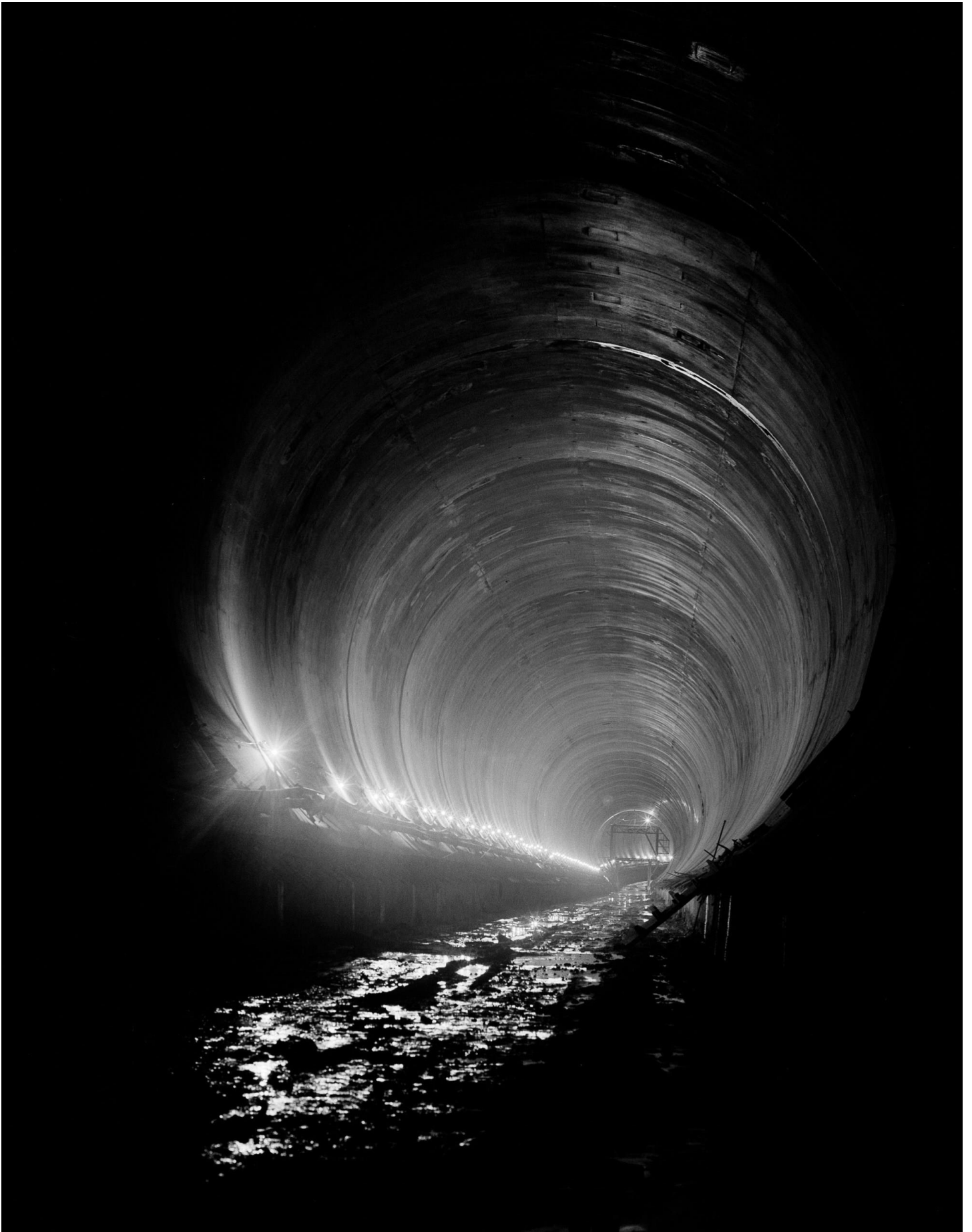


The completed inlet and outlet works with a long access bridge for the B.F. Sisk Dam and San Luis Reservoir, joint-use facilities designed and constructed by the federal Bureau of Reclamation and operated and maintained by the California Department of Water Resources (below). The San Luis Complex is located in Merced County, California. Photo taken Aug. 16, 1966. **California Department of Water Resources**

At the time of its initial construction, California's State Water Project was one of the largest water infrastructure projects in U.S. history. Construction began in 1961, and the first water deliveries reached Southern California in 1972. Spanning over 700 miles from the Feather River watershed in California's upper northeast to Lake Perris in the south, it remains a marvel of modern engineering and a testament to the state's 20th century technological dominance. Its construction was witnessed and documented by both the public and the state government, and California's Department of Water Resources (DWR) hosts a massive public photo archive that continues to grow. Its photos convey a notably majestic vision of California, celebrating the state's belief in its ability to "solve" the arid West's water problems.



Workers assemble the rebar for the construction of a discharge line at the Dos Amigos Pumping Plant site, built on the California Aqueduct-San Luis Canal in Merced County, California. The State Water Project facility, which was completed in 1966, would lift waters over 100 feet from the aqueduct as it continues its southern path for the SWP. Photo taken March 12, 1965 **Bob Dunn/California Department of Water Resources**



The construction phase of the 35-foot diameter Oroville Dam Diversion Tunnel No. 1 in

Butte County, California. Two tunnels were built to divert water from the Feather River during the dam's construction and then plugged at its completion in 1967. Today, the tunnels are used to discharge water from the underground Edward Hyatt Powerplant located near Oroville Dam. Photo taken Aug. 30, 1963. **Gene Russell/California Department of Water Resources**



A worker paints a primer coat on the second South Bay Aqueduct Surge Tank on top of a hill overlooking the South Bay Pumping Plant and Bethany Dams and Reservoir in Alameda County, California (left). Photo taken May 7, 1965 **Bob Mortensen/California Department of Water Resources**

In addition to their technical and aesthetic mastery, the images express a sense of utopian optimism. The photos in this essay, all taken from 1962 to 1968, reflect a post-World War II confidence that grand infrastructure could tame and re-engineer where “nature” fell short. Big projects were utilitarian in their capacity to solve large-scale water resource problems, yet they also communicated that the nation — or in this case, a colossal state that essentially functions as a nation — was the hero to slay Western water scarcity. Like many such projects, it was intended to be witnessed and celebrated by citizens — a perpetual reminder that the state was working to solve its water problems. As anthropologist Brian Larkin put it, its visual grandeur serves “to rearrange the hierarchy of its functions so that the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant.” Thus infrastructure at this scale does tremendous political work. These photos reflect the mid-20th century’s political philosophy, back

when residents rallied behind the social spectacle of large public works projects more readily than they do today. With the recent removal of the Klamath dams and the ongoing push for more removals, the public is perhaps now more willing to celebrate water infrastructure's elimination than its construction.



A couple watches as the Feather River flows over the Thermalito Diversion Dam construction site in Butte County, California. The State Water Project dam is located 4.5 miles downstream from Oroville Dam. The facility has radial spillway gates and diverts water into the Thermalito Power Canal and creates a diversion pool for Edward Hyatt Powerplant located near Oroville Dam. Photo taken March 11, 1965. **Gene Russell/California Department of Water Resources**

The Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers meet at the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta before draining into the Pacific Ocean via the San Francisco Bay system. At this confluence, the delta's water is captured and redirected into two concrete leviathans that sprawl across the state: the federal Central Valley Project (CVP) and the southern section of the State Water Project (SWP). The delta is home to more than a thousand miles of levees, over 50 reclaimed "islands" and 700 miles of waterways that spiral wildly across a region around the size of Rhode Island. For the last 70 years, the webs of water coursing into and out of the delta have served as a popular theater for state water politics. The photos of the California Aqueduct make visible this theater, showing the

historic transformation of the California landscape into what Erwin Cooper, a former information officer for the DWR, dubbed an “Aqueduct Empire.”

“In other words, grand infrastructure of this scale does tremendous political work.”



Construction of the Edward Hyatt Powerplant, located near Oroville Dam in Butte County, California. The State Water Project facility, completed in 1967, maximized power production through a pumped-storage operation where water, released for power in excess of local and downstream needs, is returned to storage in Lake Oroville during off-peak periods and used for generation during peak power needs. **California Department of Water Resources**

The political vision and the operational infrastructure required to provide abundant, statewide water dominate both the landscape and the images. The earliest pictures were made right before Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, so the project was born even as American environmentalism was burgeoning into a popular movement. Over 60 years later, that mid-century optimism has collided with the 21st century's environmental collapse, when climate change and the overdevelopment of water resources have done irreparable harm to the Western landscape. The massive infrastructure that embodied hope and aspiration in the 1960s can be experienced as a historical relic today. Often seen as sites of the state's aging water infrastructure, they are in regular need of repair, as evidenced most dramatically by the major failure of the Oroville Dam in 2017, which forced nearly 200,000 people to evacuate.



A vehicle is dwarfed by the size of this completed section of the San Luis Canal/California Aqueduct, which is part of the Central Valley Project and California State Water Project in Merced County, California. Photo taken Feb. 17, 1966.**J.C. Dahilig/Bureau of Reclamation**





From a construction overlook, a family observes the construction of the Delta Pumping Plant, the first major plant designed and constructed within the California State Water Project. Photo taken July 2, 1965 (left). **Bob Dunn / California Department of Water Resources**

The earth-fill Whiskeytown Dam and the "Glory Hole," a 24-foot-diameter concrete overflow drain constructed to manage the lake's level, were completed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1963. President John F. Kennedy dedicated the dam on Sept. 28, 1963. Photo taken May 25, 1964 (right). **California Department of Water Resources**



An aerial view looks south over the estimated crowd of 3,500 who attended the Oroville Dam dedication. The event featured speeches from California Gov. Ronald Reagan and Department of Water Resources Director William R. Gianelli. Oroville Dam and Lake Oroville are located one mile downstream from the junction of the Feather River's tributaries in Butte County. Construction was initiated in 1961, and the embankment was topped in 1967, making the earth-filled dam, which was the tallest in the U.S., the centerpiece of the California State Water Project. Photo taken May 4, 1968. **Vince Arrant/California Department of Water Resources**

The DWR Photography Unit is still at work today, with six photographers traveling the state and Bill Kelley III, the unit's archivist, responsible for scanning the archival images. The unit's office is tucked away at the department's Sacramento headquarters, in a windowless room suited for glare-free scanning. Kelley estimates that more than 250,000 negatives and color slides still need to be scanned — a task that will continue well after he's gone. "Initially, these photos started as engineering research," he said, but "I appreciate that DWR made the commitment to this position," that is, the long-term photo-documenting of its water management. Given how many photos are already online, the volume of work this small unit has made over seven decades is stunning. Its

sheer volume reflects photography's political power, with the Photography Unit serving both as a visual archive of state water management and as a tool to justify DWR's continued expansion.

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California's population has grown from 16 million when the SWP was approved in 1960 to 39 million today. The lack of equilibrium between California's people and its water resources has long plagued the state's development, especially since more than 90% of its population has settled south of Sacramento, while roughly 75% of its rain falls north of the capital city. The history of the California empire involves a continuous reckoning with its water, from statehood and the Gold Rush to today's acute climate change. Yet these photographs do more than document historical moments. They chronicle California's ongoing pursuit of utopia — a fantasy in which water flows abundantly through rivers and aqueducts to nourish the state's farms, cities and industry, perpetually defying the region's aridity and guaranteeing its promised future. Re-engineering the environment at this scale is undeniably ambitious, but the West will forever be haunted by being on the dry side of the 100th meridian that divides the humid East from the arid West — a fact that threatens the California utopia, no matter the infrastructure, no matter the pretty picture.



Work continued around the clock at the Oroville Dam site on the Feather River in Butte County, California. Construction of the California State Water Project facility began in 1961, and the embankment was topped in 1967. **Vince Arrant/California Department of Water Resources**

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