CA Considers Controversial Desalination Plant

AMY TAXIN, Associated Press

HUNTINGTON BEACH, Calif. (AP) — State coastal officials say a hotly disputed proposal to turn ocean water into tap in Orange County should be revamped to protect marine life but the company planning to build what would be one of the Western Hemisphere's two biggest desalination plants called the recommended changes a deal killer.

The California Coastal Commission on Wednesday will consider a proposal by Boston-based Poseidon Water to build a $900 million plant off the coast in Huntington Beach to provide the drought-prone and ever-growing Southern California suburbs with a new local source of 50 million gallons of drinking water a day.

The state agency charged with protecting California's coastline must decide not only whether to approve the project backed by thirsty regional water agencies and reviled by environmentalists striving to protect marine life and restore fishing to a community that prides itself as a haven for beach-loving tourists, but also under what conditions.

Staff members at the commission have recommended requiring Poseidon to revamp its design to draw in 127 million gallons a day of sea water from beneath the ocean floor instead of through an open intake, which currently pulls in more than 80 million marine critters a year.

"If you want to do desalination, there's an environmentally benign way to do it," said Tom Luster, an environmental scientist at the commission.

But infiltration galleries used to draw water beneath the ocean floor won't work in Huntington Beach, Poseidon officials say, due to the volume of water required and the prohibitive cost of the technology. California coastal authorities have already signed off on a similar plant under construction in Carlsbad that uses an open intake and more than twice the amount of ocean water to produce the same amount of tap.

"There are no large-scale plants that use a subsurface intake," said Scott Maloni, Poseidon's vice president of development. "It's a poison pill."

Fifteen years ago, the Huntington Beach plant was hailed by many as an environmentally-friendly use of an existing intake of ocean water being used to cool a local power plant In 2010, however, California started requiring power plants to phase out the ocean-based cooling mechanism after finding it harmed marine life.

Environmentalists say Poseidon shouldn't be allowed to extend the damage to some

100 surrounding miles of coastline, especially as the local power plant phases out the technology by 2020. Along with local residents and some recently-elected Huntington Beach city officials, they want the commission to deny the project.

"They're planning to create the same impacts the power plant has just resolved," said Joe Geever, manager of water programs at Surfrider, noting desalination facilities elsewhere use subsurface intakes and diffusors to lessen the effects of a brine discharge released back into the ocean.

Desalination has been used in other countries but has been slower to catch on in the United States. A number of projects are being considered for California, and the state is currently drafting a policy for how these facilities should be built.

Local water officials have backed the Huntington Beach proposal as a way to reduce reliance on water from outside the region. The Orange County Water District has yet to sign a contract but is considering purchasing all the water the plant produces once it starts running in 2017.

Right now, desalinated water is more expensive but in a decade that could change, said John Kennedy, the district's executive director of engineering.

"There's just lots of competing interests for imported water," Kennedy said. "If you can desalt the ocean in your backyard, you need to look at that very closely."

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