Our Region's Trusted Water Leader
San Diego County Water Authority

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News Release

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Extraordinary State Demands Thwart Research on Seawater Desalination Technologies
Water Authority pilot project at Camp Pendleton blocked by State Lands Commission

The San Diego County Water Authority is closing down work on a potential seawater desalination plant at U.S. Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton due to extraordinary permitting hurdles and related costs created by the State Lands Commission staff, along with the decreased potential that the plant will be needed in coming decades.

For the past three years, the Water Authority has been developing a small-scale pilot facility to assess seawater intake and treatment technologies at Camp Pendleton, with grant funding from state and federal agencies. The resulting study would have been the first in California to investigate an innovative subsurface intake technology for ocean water.

However, staff at the State Lands Commission insisted that the Water Authority go above and beyond statutory and regulatory permitting requirements, adding a projected $626,000 to the pilot project cost and making it financially infeasible. The proposed pilot project would have treated up to 20 gallons of seawater per minute, providing valuable data statewide.

In a Sept. 27 letter, Water Authority General Manager Maureen Stapleton encouraged commission Chair Betty Yee to support innovation and provide more streamlined approvals for research projects, as allowed by law.

"Because the Study will likely never reach the State Lands Commission for your consideration, we are sending you this letter to inform you of what we perceive to be untenable positions being taken by your staff, the net result of which will have a significant chilling effect on innovation and research of new technology to support environmentally sensitive, new water supplies for California," Stapleton said.

“In particular, the Water Authority’s research could have been used to optimize the development of ocean desalination, including the use of subsurface intakes, while protecting the environment and ensuring consistency with the (Ocean Plan Amendment).”

The full letter is at http://bit.ly/PendletonDesalLetter.

A Camp Pendleton desalination project has been viewed by the Water Authority for years as a water supply option after 2030. It has been part of the agency’s adaptive management strategy to pursue multiple water supply reliability options in light of projected demands, the development of additional local supplies and other factors.

The Water Authority started working with Camp Pendleton officials in 2007 on feasibility and technical studies for a potential project at the southwest corner of the base that would produce at least 50 million gallons a day. The Camp Pendleton site options were about eight miles north of the Claude “Bud” Lewis Carlsbad Desalination Plant, completed in 2015 to provide up to 54 million gallons of drinking water a day for the San Diego region.

Unlike the Carlsbad project, which used existing seawater intake and discharge facilities, a seawater desalination plant at Camp Pendleton would require all-new intake and discharge facilities.

In 2015, the Water Authority’s Board of Directors approved an agreement with Camp Pendleton to study open-ocean and subsurface seawater intake technologies on the base, focused on minimizing environmental impacts from operations, determining the variability in water quality from each intake technology, addressing seasonal water quality changes such as algae blooms, and finding the best pre-treatment systems to improve performance of the reverse-osmosis membranes used to remove salt from seawater. The same year, the Board authorized a $4.05 million contract for permitting, building, operating and reporting on a pilot-scale seawater intake testing program to support a potential Camp Pendleton project.

Since 2015, regional water demand forecasts have steadily decreased and local supply development by Water Authority member agencies has increased. Most notably, the City of San Diego is moving ahead with its Pure Water Program to use proven water purification technology for cleaning recycled water and producing safe, high-quality drinking water by 2021.

As the anticipated need for a Camp Pendleton desal plant decreased, the state added regulatory hurdles that made further pilot studies too costly. The Water Authority initially applied for Statutory Exemption from review under the California Environmental Quality Act for research projects, as allowed by law.

However, State Lands Commission staff required the Water Authority to present a “mitigated negative declaration” under CEQA. That 214-page document, developed at the cost of $130,000, shows the intake study would have no significant environmental impact.

Regardless, in June 2018, commission staff demanded a full Environmental Impact Report at the cost of an additional $626,000. Funds for that work aren’t in the Water Authority’s existing contract for the pilot project and cannot be supported with the current budget.

Instead of moving ahead on the pilot project, the Water Authority staff on Sept. 27 informed the Board that no further activities on the project are planned and that staff is moving to withdraw permit applications and otherwise shut down project work.

Feasibility and advanced technical studies that already have been performed will allow a Camp Pendleton desal project to remain a viable back-up option for the region if conditions warrant another assessment in future years.

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The San Diego County Water Authority sustains a $220 billion regional economy and the quality of life for 3.3 million residents through a multi-decade water supply diversification plan, major infrastructure investments and forward-thinking policies that promote fiscal and environmental responsibility. A public agency created in 1944, the Water Authority delivers wholesale water supplies to 24 retail water providers, including cities, special districts and a military base.

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