



Moss Landing Desalination Plan Started

DETAILS of a Cal-Am plan to build a large seawater desalination plant at Moss Landing won't be known for at least 18 months, and the plant can't be a reality for at least four to six years.

Contrast this with the Water Management District's proposal to build a desalination plant in Sand City for a Monterey Peninsula water supply, a plan to be submitted to voters in 2004 and, if approved, built before Cal-Am finishes detailing its plan.

Cal-Am, which announced its intention in February to build a desalination plant near the Duke Energy plant in Moss Landing, must first complete an environmental assessment before it can file a formal application with the state's Public Utilities Commission, which regulates privately owned companies. The privately owned Cal-Am has selected a consultant and expects to begin that assessment in 2004, a company spokesman said. That will take an estimated 18 months, which means the specifics of Cal-Am's plan won't be known until the middle of 2005 when it submits the environmental assessment and specifics of a proposal in a formal application to the PUC.

That formal application will start a more public process as the PUC analyzes Cal-Am's assessment, holds a scoping hearing and starts the steps necessary for a full environmental impact report on the specific proposal. The exact procedures and timetable involved in those PUC processes won't be determined until an administrative law judge sets them, according to a PUC spokeswoman. That step won't occur until after Cal-Am submits the application, the PUC staff analyzes the company's assessment and the judge holds the scoping hearing, the spokeswoman said.

Cal-Am hopes the PUC processes will take no longer than 18 months so the utility can get a permit by the end of 2006 and start construction in 2007, a company spokesman said.

But that hoped-for timing is very uncertain because the PUC has never been the lead agency on an environmental report for a complex water supply project. In addition, the Moss Landing project would be the largest desalination plant in Northern California, which is likely to complicate issues and attract close scrutiny from federal, state and local officials that govern coastal development and impacts on the ocean.

The Peninsula's Water Board—objecting to a major water supply project outside the District's boundaries and, thus, not accountable to District voters—decided a suitable desalination plant could be built more quickly in Sand City by utilizing a technology the PUC didn't consider. Slant drilling is proposed to reach through the sand dunes and under the ocean to overcome the limits the narrow beach poses for radial wells.

Seawater Desalination Schedules

Year	Cal-Am Timetable	District Timetable	
2003			
	Dec	X	Draft EIR circulating
2004	Jan		Proponent's environmental assessment starts
	Apr	X	Final EIR certified
	Nov	X	Sand City plant submitted to Peninsula voters
2005	Early	X	Final design, finance arrangements, permits
	Mid		Moss Landing application submitted to PUC
2006	Early	X	Plant under construction
	Late		Final EIR certified
2007			Final design, permits
2008			Plant under construction

Surge of Desalination Planning Raises New Questions

THERE are now nine seawater desalination plants along the California coast, with plans in various stages for building 18 more. That surge of interest is generally a result of development far outpacing the natural water resources.

That trend prompted a report by the California Coastal Commission in October that outlined some recent concerns government needs to consider. (For the full report, see <http://www.coastal.ca.gov/energy/Th3a-10-2003.pdf>.)

Privately owned, multinational companies have proposed some of the largest desalination plants, the report explains. Those proposals are seeking a major shift in public policy— that a public trust resource like water can be privatized and turned into

a commodity. They also involve international trade agreements that may make it difficult for local and state governments to regulate them. Conditions in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the General Agreement on Trade & Tariffs (GATT) have created complex agreements that potentially conflict with state and local regulatory authority.

Those are issues that will have to be dealt with in Monterey County because 6 of the 18 planned desalination plants would be here, including the large one that German-owned Cal-Am envisions in Moss Landing, about 20 miles north of Cal-Am's Monterey Peninsula service area.