



City of Santa Cruz Water Department and Soquel Creek Water District scwd² Desalination Program

The following opinion column was published in the Good Times (February 24, 2011 issue) by Don Lane and Dan Kriege. Don Lane is the vice mayor of Santa Cruz and Dan Kriege is a board member of the Soquel Creek Water District. They both serve as members of the scwd² Task Force.

Desal: It Deserves an Informed Decision

Our community has a complex water supply problem. It includes the overdraft of freshwater aquifers. It includes the likelihood of severe droughts brought about by global climate change. It includes the likelihood that regulators will reduce our water supply from surface streams to protect endangered fish species. We must continue to evaluate the threats and risks to our environment, our households and our local economy—and evaluate potential remedies to our water supply problems.

Critics question whether or not our community should build a desalination plant to meet our water needs. These critics typically identify a number of important issues we need to examine as desalination is considered ... and then jump to the conclusion that desalination should be rejected. Yet by arguing for rejection of desal they are essentially saying that we should “shelve” or cancel the project before allowing the community to learn and consider the latest information on desalination.

The scwd² Task Force, formed by the Santa Cruz City Council and the board of the Soquel Creek Water District, is working diligently to examine a variety of issues related to the proposed desalination plant, including energy usage; the cost to ratepayers; the impacts to the marine environment; the quality of desalinated water; and the overall question of whether or not desalination is the best approach. A full Environmental Impact Report is currently evaluating many of these issues, and this report, along with public comments, will assist the entire community in understanding them.

Many suggested alternatives to the desal plant have been studied extensively and found inadequate to meet our needs—or found to be infeasible. (For example, while there is real value in implementing rainwater catchment in our yards, it will not meet our needs during an extended drought.) We could go through the entire list of ideas and alternatives that the City of Santa Cruz and the Soquel Creek Water District have seriously considered and decided were inadequate but limited newspaper space does not allow us to go through each one here.

Opponents find it politically useful to claim that specific alternatives should be looked at before desal—ignoring the fact that elected representatives and citizens that volunteer on local commissions thoroughly examined and considered many alternatives. Those

citizens sat through dozens of public meetings with countless hours of public testimony to decide that desalination was a reasonable and necessary approach to pursue—coupled with a robust package of conservation measures and the likelihood of curtailment during droughts

An important concern in this community debate is that the desalination process is energy intensive and will be more expensive than our current water. It is important to note that any new water supply source will be more expensive than our existing supplies. It is useful to put the additional energy needs of a desalination plant into perspective. The annual energy consumed by the proposed desalination facility in a normal year would be very modest considering that we are talking about maintaining a healthy and viable water system for more than 100,000 people. The issues of energy use in desal are important but should not be viewed in isolation from the environmental and social impacts of a severe water shortage in a drought period—in terms of maintaining wildlife habitat, protecting our ground water supply from saltwater intrusion, protecting the health and hygiene of the community, and sustaining the economy and local jobs.

Claims that desalination could possibly allow dangerous toxins to enter our drinking water are simply a smokescreen since the reverse osmosis technology has been proven to be effective. This possibility, however unlikely, also exists with our current treatment processes, as it does with any water treatment facility. We do not hear desal opponents suggesting we stop using our current water treatment facilities and shut down our current water system. This is an intentionally alarmist claim.

No one we know believes desalination alone is a panacea for our water supply problems. Our Integrated Water Plans identified desalination as part of a careful process of exploring new water sources while moving ahead with vigorous conservation measures and preparations for significant restrictions during drought periods.

Our community may decide that a desalination plant is not the way to go. But that decision should be based on an open-minded assessment of our needs and possible solutions—not based on the presumption that desalination is bad. It's easy to claim that there are problems with desalination and to repeat a few questionable "facts" about desalination that appeal to our deep concerns about the natural environment. It's another to demonstrate the truth of those claims and to present a demonstrably viable alternative plan that would actually meet our community water needs.

A recent written statement from the leaders of the local opposition to desal specifically said "it is critically important to consider both the advantages and disadvantages of a desalination plant in order to make well-informed sound choices." We wish they would follow their own suggestion and allow the well-informed consideration to continue.

Rather than terminate our community's desalination planning process, we believe the community is better served if we stick with a thorough examination of all the facts and issues and then make an informed decision.

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