

Desalination-plant effects raise concerns of sanctuary officials

By MAY WONG

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SANTA CRUZ — A series of proposed desalination plants along the Central Coast has sparked the attention of officials at the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

At its monthly meeting Friday at the Santa Cruz Holiday Inn, the Sanctuary Advisory Council discussed the potential danger of California coastal cities turning increasingly to the sea as a source for drinking water.

Nine desalination plants are being built or proposed along Monterey Bay, but no one knows yet how the briny byproduct that will be dumped back in the sea will affect the ocean or its crea-

tures, said Patrick Cotter, the sanctuary's environmental scientist.

Scientists estimate the heavy brine discharge would nearly double the salt concentration of the water, from 33 percent to 65 percent, Cotter said.

Two modest-size desalination plants are already in operation at the Pacific Gas & Electric Co. power plant in Moss Landing and the Monterey Bay Aquarium. A third was built at the Hearst San Simeon Historical Monument but has not been used yet, Cotter said.

None have yet monitored the effects on ocean life, Cotter told the advisory council.

"We have no information on what that brine is doing," he said. "We don't

know what the long term effects are on kelp forests or the sand channel."

That will soon change.

A fourth desalination plant has been built by the Marina Coast Water District and will soon be open. NOAA officials plan to closely monitor that plant, which will treat up to 450,000 gallons of seawater per day, Cotter said.

Desalination plants are also being proposed in Marina, Cambria, Fort Ord and Sand City, some in response to an expected increase in population from planned development. Santa Cruz officials are also considering a desalination plant to supplement the city's water supply in case of a drought.

With so many desalination plants on

the drawing table, Cotter said there may be a cumulative effect on marine life. Then again, he said, there may not be a problem at all.

"The issue is, we want to stop any problem before it's too late," Cotter said.

Members of the advisory council vowed to keep a watchful eye over the desalination plants. If the eco-system of the Monterey Bay is significantly harmed in any way, the council should propose restrictions, members said.

"We don't want to change the Monterey Bay into the Great Salt Lake," said Ed Ueber, manager of the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary.