

# Critics pick apart environmental eval

Desalination

Skeptics focus in on shortage estimates, alternatives

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SANTA CRUZ — Desalination skeptics packed a Quaker Meetinghouse on Thursday to hear a critical evaluation of an environmental report for a \$129 million facility that would serve 135,000 water ratepayers.

More than 100 people listened as Rick Longinotti, a founder of Santa Cruz Desal Alternatives, questioned a

draft environmental impact report's conclusions about water supply shortages, alternatives and the impact on growth and the environment. He argued the city has made a political decision to allow for water use to grow at UC Santa Cruz and within the city's limits from 3.2 billion gallons in annual demand now to 3.8 billion by 2030, figures published in the report, rather than hold demand down.

The former electrician

turned marriage counselor and anti-desal crusader said the city needs to wean golf courses off drinking water, share excess winter flow with neighboring districts, become more aggressive with conservation measures and better manage the Loch Lomond Reservoir rather than pursue a costly desalting facility. He called again for a formal water-neutral development policy similar to one in place within the city's desalination partner, the

Soquel Creek Water District, which requires developers to directly offset their new use through conservation rather than pay fees that may not all go toward conservation.

He said the report weakened the city's case about the impact of worst-case drought. The most recent estimate for near-term annual demand is 3.5 billion gallons with a peak-season shortage at 29 per-

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cent, down from 45 percent estimated a decade ago when demand was projected to be much higher.

Longinotti noted 29 percent is within striking distance of a worst-case customer curtailment of 25 percent set by the city's Water Commission more than a decade ago. He said he believed the city could close that 4 percent gap by treating turbid, or muddy, water from the San Lorenzo River and expanding conservation measures identified by water officials in the report.

However, in 2005, as part of approving an integrated water plan, the Water Commission and City Council

reduced the maximum curtailment to 15 percent based on recommendations from a consultant who said anything higher would create tough economic conditions and that a new supply — namely desalination — was merited along with ongoing conservation.

Former Mayor Keith Sugar, an environmental attorney, said, "It's almost like the verdict was pre-ordained. It looks like one of those EIRs that is result-oriented not based in science as much as it is in the political imperatives that gave rise to it."

Longinotti urged attendees to ask the City Council to extend the review period for the environmental report 30 days past the current July 15 deadline and engage neighbors and friends ahead of a 2014 vote.

Earlier Thursday, city Water Director Bill Kocher acknowledged demand has dropped significantly but he pointed to six years of economic downturn. He said the city has to plan for demand to return to pre-recession levels.

"We've foreclosed a ton of homes and a closed a ton of businesses," he said. "We are beginning to come back from that."

Additionally, Kocher said demand estimates are based on reducing diversions on the North Coast streams to improve habitat for endangered fish species. If regulators don't approve the city's proposed reductions, shortages will be much worse.

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