

# Fish regulators weigh in on desalination

Alternatives not fully flushed out, state and federal agencies say

*Desalination* **WN**  
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SANTA CRUZ — State and federal agencies negotiating with Santa Cruz over fish-habitat protection say the city has not thoroughly studied alternatives to a proposed seawater desalination facility designed to boost water supply.

Letters from the National Marine Fisheries Service and California Department of Fish and Wildlife critiquing an environmental evaluation of the now-stalled desal project say the city should explore the cumulative potential of its own infrastructure improvements and regional coordination.

The agencies — whose requests for improved river and stream flows have been cited by the city as a primary reason for pursuing desal — say a host of additional alternatives were rejected without adequate investigation.

The regulators have not taken a position on desal, but are among a host of agencies that would have some permitting authority over the plant.

"Unfortunately, the alternatives analysis does not appear to thoroughly evaluate alternatives recommended by the NMFS and CDFW through more than 10 years of technical assistance provided to the city" in the development of a fish conservation plan, the federal

## DESAL

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agency said in its letter.

The Sentinel obtained the July 19 letter, as well as one from the state dated Aug. 13, ahead of the city's planned September release of comments on the desal environmental report. The remarks from fisheries managers reflect the uphill battle faced by the city in convincing the public about the need for and impacts of desal.

"Both CDFW and NMFS have worked with the city for years going over system modeling and learning about how our system works, so the detail in their questions isn't unexpected," said Linette Almond, the city's deputy water director. "Answering them will, as you'd expect, require a significant amount

of effort and possibly some additional supply modeling. But we simply haven't even begun those discussions yet."

City officials declined to make further remarks regarding public comment on the environmental evaluation, saying the more than 400 submissions received during a 90-day review period will be addressed thoroughly during completion of the final report, which may take up to a year.

### PLANS ON HOLD

On Aug. 20, the city's top two officials called for a halt in developing the desal project amid a unfavorable political climate they said was driven largely by a lack of public understanding about the generations-old supply shortages and exacerbating effect of fisheries protection. The mayor and city manager have recommended the City

Council not place the project before voters in 2014 as first planned.

The massive environmental review, which so far has cost \$1.6 million to produce, discusses a number of alternatives, including revised reservoir management, inter-agency transfers and greater conservation. The city concluded that transforming ocean water into drinking water was the only plan that would supply enough water to safeguard against seasonal drought and habitat degradation for threatened and endangered fish species.

But the state criticized the city for using outdated data in citing impacts of flow restrictions and for not more fully exploring the potential of recycling treated wastewater. The Fish and Wildlife letter says the city's analysis doesn't "examine any rea-

sonably feasible combination of the alternatives that make common sense, and when implemented together, may have a synergistic effect on increased water supply."

Jonathan Ambrose, a biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, said the city's voluntary move a dozen years ago to improve fish habitat is not driving desal. He noted that Santa Cruz promoted desal as a supply solution long before regulators proposed the current stream and river flows that city officials say will be difficult to achieve in dry years.

"I don't believe it's appropriate to put desal on the backs of fish," Ambrose said. "We are really trying to find ways to make it work without desal, but it's their decision."

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