



Belted Kingfisher
(Megasceryle alcyon)

Slo Coast Journal

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Cambrians Drill Down on Issues and Again Stymy Proposed Desalination Test Wells

by Lynne Harkins

Forward progress on desalination appears to have suffered yet another setback as once again Cambria's Community Services District Board failed to adopt a resolution on their agenda which would have given a green light to moving towards desal test well drilling on the beach at Santa Rosa Creek. The Board cited the receipt of more "technical" input from written public comment (closed on February 16) than their consultants could respond to by the February 25th meeting.

Without the consultants' responses to earlier comments being made available to the public, it seemed irregular that the Board, nonetheless, opened a hearing in which still more comment was received from the public about the Initial Study for the proposed Negative Declaration which essentially posits that no environmental harm will result from the proposed extensive test well drillings and installations.

The primary opposition to the test wells proposal came from well-informed community activists who oppose any shortchanging of environmental review of the possible impacts of the desal test wells. Mary Webb spoke about it being unacceptable to not tie the whole desalination project to the test well drilling and about the need for a full Environmental Impact Review on a full project. She listed important scientific documents and endangered species recovery plans that were completely omitted from consideration in the Negative Declaration document that was prepared at the CCSD Board's direction.

Symptomatic of the tension between the Board and those who urge more environmental analysis was the exchange between Elizabeth Bettenhausen and Director Frank DeMicco. The very ground seemed to be shifting beneath the CCSD directors' feet as the subject turned to [earthquake liquefaction](#).

Ms. Bettenhausen, not for the first time, stressed that the Board has yet to address the serious possible consequences of such liquefaction in the context of the proposed installation of testing and monitoring beach wells, not to mention the actual wells for the future desalination facility itself, in liquefaction-prone sand. Director DeMicco pointedly took issue with Ms. Bettenhausen, dismissively saying that liquefaction wouldn't happen in the Santa Rosa Creek beach area.

An investigation, however, supported Ms. Bettenhausen's concerns. Director DeMicco, it appears, got it wrong. According to Cambria's own million dollar Water Master Plan, the Santa Rosa Creek floodplain has a "very high



The small bench in this photo marks the spot above the Santa Rosa Creek area where sediment was collected last October that contained methylmercury-a potent neurotoxin. An attempt to diminish the significance of that [citizen-science revelation](#) is apparent in the [Army Corps' recent letter](#) to the Coastal Commission. They say that sampling came from the creek and they'll be drilling on the beach only.

The photo below, taken beachward and above the "bench-marked" mercury-bearing sediment collection site, is evidence that the Army Corps' distinction between "in-channel sediments" and "beach sand" is not one that holds up well during winter storm conditions. Additional photos show the vigorous flow of the creek, scouring out sediments, as it churns towards its ocean outfall. This process goes on annually, which has raised questions in citizens' minds about possible downstream transport of legacy mercury mine deposits from a mine five miles inland.

liquefaction potential." (Final EIR of CCSD Water Master Plan, 5.8-10 and 11). Ms. Bettenhausen intends to correct the public record at the next CCSD meeting.

Another objection was raised by Mickie Burton, who pointed out that the water was for growth to serve the water wait list, in spite of the fact that it has been legally established that those wait list people do not have a right to water in the sense of it being a property right.

Given that the purpose of any community service district is to serve strictly the needs of its current rate payers, the CCSD's pursuit of desalination strikes some as inappropriate. However, at least one director, Alan MacKinnon, is asking questions about the fiscal soundness, for current rate payers, of proceeding further with desalination.

No one argues that Cambria needs to improve its water availability, but there are many more efficient, environmentally benign, and to-scale alternatives than desalination to address that need. There are local information/periodic [workshops](#) addressing rain catchment; new, easier greywater regulations and installation, and other water conserving, low impact developments along with answers to the question [Where's the Water?](#)

For an excellent look at desalination and alternatives, see the Pacific Institute's [With A Grain of Salt](#). Additionally, an edifying [panel discussion about desalination](#) took place at the November 30th Ocean Protection Council meeting.

As a companion to that panel, there was another one dealing with contaminants in recycled water, prompting some to ask whether the reverse osmosis process used for filtration in desalination might better be applied to cleaning up wastewater more thoroughly, so that recycled water would be of the highest possible quality for beneficial reuse. Owing to the fact that it would be fresh, not salt water being treated, there would be a great reduction in the amount of energy required.

Not incidentally, in Cambria's Water Master Plan both better water management and water recycling were scored overall as significantly better than desalination as supplemental water sources. In a May 2007 tour of the Cambria Wastewater Treatment facility, plant operations supervisor Bryan Bode estimated that installing full tertiary treatment wastewater facilities would cost 3-5 million dollars, saying also that there was room to accommodate such an addition.

This is something for Cambrians to think about when the price tag for desalination is moving towards 20 million dollars and federal funding is proving elusive. That's what statewide water activist [Conner Everts](#) suggested as he recounted how Marin transitioned away from desalination planning towards more sustainable water strategies.

(See Graph Below)

However, there is, as yet, little chance of that being on the Cambria CSD's agenda, especially at their next meeting in March. With no Board certification of the Negative Declaration for desal test wells on February 25th, Cambrians will have to wait to see if the Board responds to repeated requests - with abundant supporting evidence - for a full environmental review, whether they might stay their course with the Negative Declaration or alter it to be a Mitigated Negative Declaration.

What will be on the public's agenda, it certainly seems, will be dissatisfaction with and questions about the apparent disorder in the District's handling of this entire process. Mary Webb and others want a full accounting of differential treatment in how and when public comment is accepted and an explanation of the extra costs created by this ungainly and, to all appearances, evasive District Board and staff effort to prematurely put the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) behind them. So many questions . . .



Creek sediment scour being carried to nearshore



One thing is certain, that the public scrutiny of the CCSD Board and its desalination agenda is not going away and, indeed, shows signs of intensifying as the local paper's letters to the editor attest. More people are paying attention. More people are articulating their concerns about the well-being of the natural environment of Cambria's land and water ecosystems.

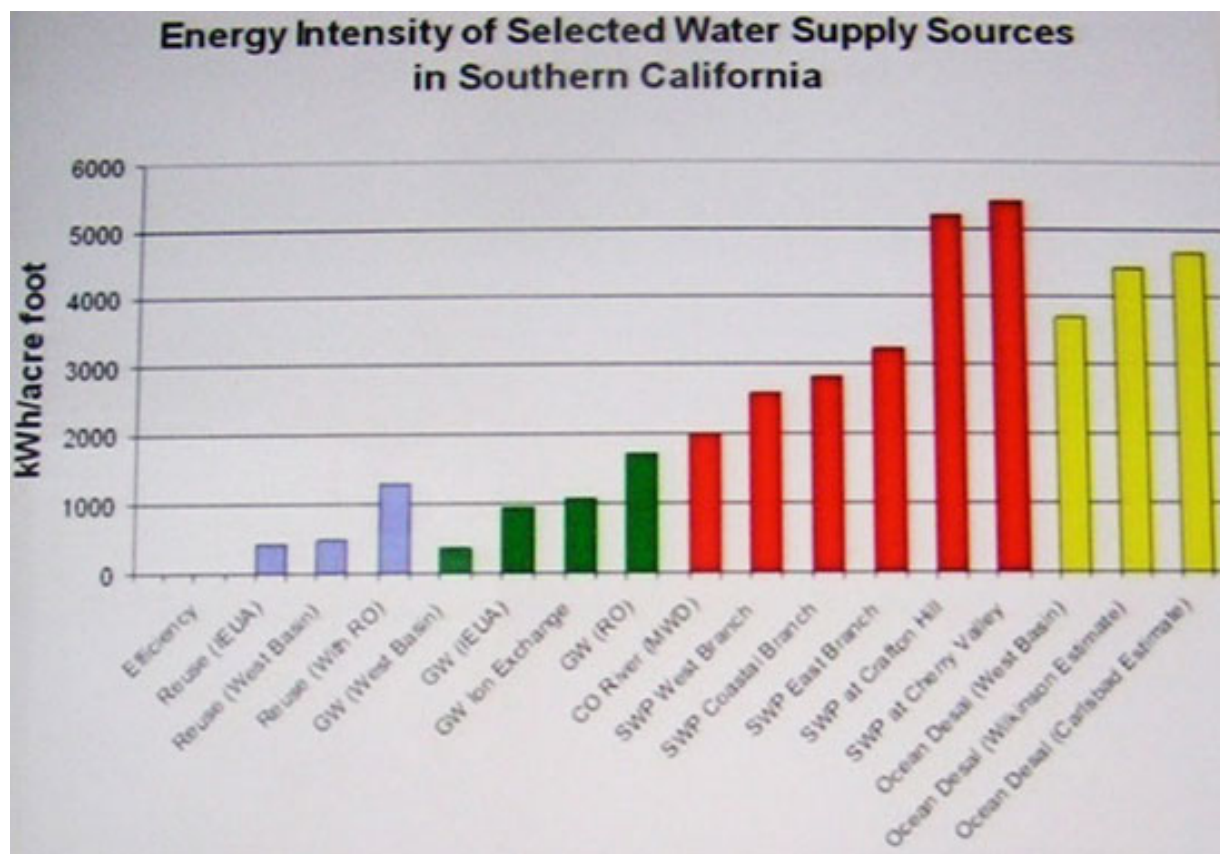
There are groups meeting about global warming and sustainability options for Cambria. It has not escaped the notice of an increasing number of residents that a desal facility is the "poster plant" for excessive energy consumption, along with it disgorging about 200,000,000 gallons annually of toxic brine effluent into the nearshore habitat which supports sensitive marine life and Cambria's tourist economy. Even if one allows for the nebulous claim that some totally unfunded solar energy will be used, that still does not result in a net reduction in energy use by the community.

Aside from the greenhouse gas emissions concerns, however, there's an increasing sense that people want to sustain the special qualities of Cambria, to step more lightly and more carefully in the forest and on the shore. This is, perhaps, a manifestation of what was recently featured in the New York Times Sunday Magazine - a compelling piece that considered the question "[Is There an Ecological Unconscious?](#)"

A comment at a CCSD meeting last fall by Valerie Bentz may have signaled the shift that some people hope for, while the Board and others in the community will resist. Ms. Bentz spoke about the possibility of sustainable options in Cambria and asked, with disarming directness, where can a move toward sustainability happen, if not in Cambria? Just how Cambria deals with its need for supplemental water will be central to answering that question.



This is the beach area where the Corps and CCSD proposed driving large, diesel "odor"emitting drilling equipment this winter for doing test well drilling and installation; while maintaining public access with a 20-50 foot clearance from equipment. Citizen activism has changed their schedule and likely saved them from at least one awkward miscalculation.



Efficiency of use (i.e. detecting and correcting leaks in water [infrastructure-detection equipment available free on loan from state](#) and reuse of water treated with Reverse Osmosis (RO) provide rate payers and the environment with truly significant savings on the pathway to sustainability.

Belted Kingfisher image on banner by [Cleve Nash](#)

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