

# State is slow to approve water projects

*Good news for desalination, but El Niño still is our best bet*

**Steven Greenhut, San Diego Union-Tribune, 8-27-15**

SACRAMENTO — The latest weather-related news reports have shifted from the ongoing drought to fears about flooding, as meteorologists predict what one news report refers to as a “Godzilla-like El Niño event” that may be headed our way. Despite possible problems, Mother Nature might fix what California officials have failed to address.

Water shortages aren’t that different than food shortages that arise in some parts of the world. The weather is the proximate cause, but the real problem stems from failed public policy. Quite simply, California policy makers have not been building and permitting sufficient water projects to carry this state through dry years.

A great example is playing itself out in Huntington Beach, where a private company has — since 1998 — been trying to build a desalination plant that turns salty ocean water into drinking water on the site of a shuttered energy plant. The latest development is good news for Poseidon Water and its potential customers. But it’s taking years to make progress.

The California Coastal Commission approved, during the Schwarzenegger administration, a similar plant that’s under construction in Carlsbad. But the same company is having a difficult time getting approvals to build a similar plant in Orange County.

The fight centers on the type of seawater-intake systems that will be used to pull water from the ocean and send it to the plant. The company proposes an “open-ocean” intake system, in which pipes pull the water from the ocean. Screens protect sea life. (That’s a similar system in Carlsbad, but the political makeup of the commission has changed.)

The alternative – favored by environmentalists and the commission — is a “subsurface” intake built underneath the sea or the beach. As the Sacramento Bee explained, these systems draw ocean water “through perforated pipes buried in the seafloor. The overlying mud and sand act as a fine filter to screen out nearly all organisms.”

Two years ago, the California Coastal Commission’s Independent Scientific Technical Advisory Panel began studying the Huntington Beach project. Its second report, released last week, found a beach-infiltration system — one of several subsurface options — “is infeasible at the Huntington Beach location” because it would have to be excessively large and it “would require many years to construct due to construction constraints on a highly used public beach.”

Another subsurface option is the “seafloor infiltration gallery,” built farther into the ocean. Such a system is “technically feasible” but inordinately expensive to build and maintain, according to the report. And it, too, would mean many years of disruption. Huntington Beach officials are fearful what the latter would mean for tourism. The subsurface systems would add \$1,000 an acre foot of water, which would ultimately be borne by ratepayers.

Not surprisingly, Poseidon officials are touting the findings. They say the report shows its plan is feasible and subsurface alternatives would create environmental problems: “several years’ worth of carbon emissions from construction vehicles, disrupted fish and wildlife habitats, and increased sea floor dredging.” They

called for prompt action. Meanwhile, environmentalists quoted in local media say the report proves the site is the wrong one for a big disruptive project.

If this is the wrong site for such a project, it's hard to imagine the right location — or at least one that doesn't draw the same complaints. Meanwhile, a similar debate surrounds a proposed project on the Monterey Peninsula.

After a process that began in 2007, the State Water Resources Control Board approved an amendment to its Water Quality Control Plan for Ocean Waters that allows the open-ocean systems, provided screens protect sea life. (That's welcome from an environmentalist-oriented agency that continues to release water from reservoirs to protect a small number of common fish.)

Desalination will never be the cure-all for California's water needs. Few Californians would want our coastline cluttered with industrial plants — and the price of water from them remains high. But the slow approach to permitting them explains much about our drought. There's progress toward building this part of the state's water infrastructure, but we still might be better off praying for rain.