

Environment & Energy

California Approves Desalination Project With Another on Deck

By Zach Bright

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- Board approved project for southern California
 - A November vote on another site could yield pushback
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A California desalination project to bolster the region's water supply has won state regulators' approval, but a separate site faces what is expected to be a more contentious vote next month.

The California Coastal Commission's 11-0 vote to green-light the \$140 million Doheny Ocean Desalination Project in Orange County's Dana Point was a win for desalination advocates and Gov. Gavin Newsom's (D) plan to boost the state's water supply that draws in part on the technology.

"We believe that the project before you today, although not perfect, provides a solid example that we can use in planning for future desalination," Kate Huckelbridge, a senior scientist for the Coastal Commission, told board members before the Oct. 13 vote.

The decision comes ahead of a commission decision in November on the California-American Water Co.'s proposal to build and own a site in Marina, Calif., along California's Central Coast.

Technology Remains Contentious

The Doheny plant is estimated to generate about 5 million gallons of drinking water daily by 2027, a boost to California's supply as it endures a record-breaking drought.

It still needs to secure a final permit from the commission and a lease from the State Lands Commission.

A dozen desalination plants already dot the state's coast, but the technology remain controversial for its energy needs and environmental harms.

Environmental advocates—including the Southern California Watershed Alliance and the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water—wrote in opposition to the Doheny plan for the threats that effluent waste could pose to marine life.

Project advocates said it would draw in seawater from ocean wells with a minimized environmental impact on marine life, making it less contentious compared to the Huntington Beach plant proposal that was blocked in the spring.

Then, environmental advocates had fiercely opposed a desalination site proposed by Poseidon Water. Newsom and several state officials backed Poseidon's plan, but the state Coastal Commission voted in May to block it.

November Vote

The California Coastal Commission's vote, set for Nov. 17, on the California-American Water Co. plant could whip up more controversy.

Coastal Commission staff in 2020 recommended that the state reject a previous proposal for a plant in Marina. Staff called it the one of the most recent "significant environmental justice concerns the Commission has considered."

The project would mean construction impacts and higher water costs for several "communities of concern," according to the commission staff's recommendation. More than half the population of the nearby cities of Castroville, Marina, and Seaside identify as people of color.

In response, California-American Water Co. withdrew its plans from consideration until now. The commission hasn't indicated its stance on the current project proposal.

Representatives of the city of Marina and the Marina Coast Water District spoke out against the plant in public comment. If built as proposed, the plant's water intake infrastructure would be sited in the city, but it wouldn't receive water from the plant.

Opponents also point to concerns that it would threaten the groundwater basin. They said they prefer water supply boosts from sources such as water recycling plants.

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