

Environment & Energy

Desalination Plant Blocked by California Coastal Commission

By Zach Bright

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- Commission unanimously voted to deny permit
 - Members cited environmental justice, energy costs
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Plans to build a desalination plant in southern California have been halted after a state coastal commission vote denied a construction permit to developer Poseidon Water.

The 11-0 vote by the California Coastal Commission on Thursday is a blow to the more than two-decades-long construction attempt by Poseidon Water, a subsidiary of the multinational Brookfield Asset Management Inc. Poseidon's plan was backed as a solution to drought conditions by Gov. Gavin Newsom (D), US Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), and other elected officials in the state.

"This was not the decision we were hoping for today," Poseidon said in a statement. "We thank Gov. Gavin Newsom for his support of this project, correctly pointing out that desalination is an important tool in the toolkit."

The permit denial is a win for the Stop Poseidon coalition, a local campaign of coastal advocates that united to oppose the desalination plant over a host of environmental, energy, and equity concerns.

"We thank the Coastal Commissioners for their resistance to the enormous political pressure that was brought to them," said Garry Brown, founder and president of Orange County Coastkeeper. "It was never a good idea for Huntington Beach, but shady money kept the project going for more than 20 years—all without a guaranteed customer or permit to build."

Environmental Concerns

Stop Poseidon members reached out to commissioners prior to the vote citing environmental risks and justice concerns. California Coastal Commission staff also raised those concerns in a report released in April that recommended for a permit denial. Among other things, the report said desalination was one of the most energy-intensive ways to obtain water and that building it would hinder efforts to reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.

Leading up to the vote, commissioners voiced concerns over privatizing water, costs to ratepayers, and harm to marine life. The plant could kill an estimated 108 million marine organisms annually through water intake valves, according to the Santa Ana Regional Water Board. In addition, the proposed build site on a brownfield atop an earthquake fault at risk of sea level rise posed risks, commission staff said.

Poseidon also failed to hold meaningful consultation with tribes or with low-income communities that could face higher water rates, commission staff said.

In response, Poseidon’s representative, DJ Moore of Latham & Watkins LLP, said the plant was a necessary tool to combat worsening drought in the region. Many Californian elected officials also spoke in support of Poseidon’s project as a way to boost the local water supply.

Commissioner Meagan Harmon, who was appointed by Newsom, voted no but said at the meeting she’s not opposed to desalination.

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