

Panel staff says OK desal test -if...

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Tests key to desalination plant planning approach a key hurdle next week boosted by a staff recommendation that the state Coastal Commission go along with the Army Corps of Engineers plan. The commission staff report, however, says that approval should only be given with the addition of two conditions intended to minimize test well impacts on wildlife habitat, recreational use and water contamination.

Installation and removal of wells on the beach near Shamel Park in Cambria should only be done during September and October to minimize impacts on birds, fish and other wildlife, as well as recreational use, and subsurface water should be tested for more than 100 contaminants— including mercury— before it's allowed to be discharged, the 29-page report says. With those conditions added, staff believes "the project would be consistent to the maximum extent practicable with the California Coastal Management Program."

Tom Luster, an environmental scientist for the commission, said April 28, "The Corps doesn't expect to discharge" any contaminants, and "our condition is meant to confirm that the project doesn't result in an adverse impact." The commission is expected to rule on whether the Army Corps plan is as consistent as possible with the state's coastal regulations at its meeting in Santa Cruz on Thursday, May 13. The Corps and the Cambria Community Services District say that, as a federally funded project, the testing is not subject to county and state permits. Still, state regulators must determine if the project is as consistent with state laws as possible.

The geotechnical and hydrogeologic test project is intended to determine if enough seawater can be drawn from under the sand to supply a planned desalination plant. The actual plant would be located away from beach — possibly miles away — and subject to its own review and permitting process. Such wells are intended to pull in subsurface seawater without disturbing marine life, according to the commission report.

The testing would involve the initial drilling of up to 10 test holes along the beach; up to three would be converted to test wells. There would also be two monitoring wells near each test well, for a total of up to 16 holes in the beach. Installation of the wells would put at least three vehicles on the beach, the report says: a drill rig about 41 feet long weighing from 17 to 26 tons; a 40-foot pipe trailer weighing about 19 tons; and a pickup truck. Wellheads would be at least 3 feet under the sand when installation is complete. Test and monitoring wells would be removed about 14 months after installation, according to the plan. Installation and removal is expected to take a total of four to six weeks during that time.

If coastal commissioners follow staffers' recommendations, it could bring to a close a pitched battle that has raged over the testing regime since the services district first proposed the concept more than five years ago for a site near the San Simeon Creek mouth. After the commission rebuffed that request in December 2007, saying the district had not shown that the proposed location was the only option available, the district moved to study the area just south of the mouth of Santa Rosa Creek.

The district had been preparing its own environmental documents on the testing for desalination plant supply sources, but on April 22, directors abandoned that course after legal advisors said the Corps controls the geotech project and is responsible for the permitting. Project opponents say the district's move relinquishes local control and is intended to circumvent state laws.

Greg Sanders, president of the district's board, said, "If the commission finds that the project is consistent, then the Corps can proceed. There are no further hoops to jump through."

The Corps is involved because Congress has promised \$10.3 million in federal money toward the desalination project.

Some opponents say the tests also would limit public access and damage Shamel Park. "It makes me so sad" to contemplate the work being proposed, said Tina Dickason, who lives on Park Hill. "This is the people's park." However, Luster said, "We're expecting the project to cause only minor and temporary access issues" for the public, "based in part on the limited work windows, on the Corps keeping the wellheads below (the beach surface)," and other constraints. "It's not necessarily a choice between sensitive species and public access," he wrote in an e-mail interview. "We try to avoid and minimize impacts to both."

Sanders said that the commission's staff report "looks good to me," and the recommendation for conditional approval is consistent with the Corps' plan. "I believe the two conditions address the legitimate environmental impacts of the geotechnical investigation that were alleged at the public hearings CCSD conducted."