THE ORANGE COUNTY

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Grand jury: Time to move on desalination plants

Saying environmental accommodations have been made, and comparing the cost to the luxury of premium coffee, a report calls for 'world class' plants to ensure a water supply unbroken by drought or disaster.

By MEGHANN M. CUNIFF / STAFF WRITER

Orange County's drought-caused water woes call for a coordinated and urgent approach from public officials, including swift approval of long-delayed seawater desalination plants along the Pacific Coast.

That was among the findings in a county grand jury report released this week that described "world class" desalination plants – including one proposed for years in Huntington Beach - as critical to a more self-

sufficient local water supply.

Constructing facilities, the grand jury said, would insulate the county's residents from potentially dire future water shortages, including those caused by persistent drought and natural disasters like large earthquakes that likely would restrict the ability to import water into the region.

The report called for the county's two water districts to combine and advocate for streamlined permitting process to end years of delays.

"It's time to complete the permitting and contract negotiations, and start construction of the Huntington Beach desalination plant," report said.

jurors Grand also criticized environmental groups for unnecessary delays the in process, claiming, "The environmentalists have had their say and have been reasonably accommodated."

A large earthquake could prevent Bay Delta water from reaching Southern California and hinder distribution from local water districts. Developing another local source of water to replace imported water is crucial to ensure water reliability, the report noted.

The grand jurors' recommendations come as ocean desalination projects are being proposed throughout California's 1.000-mile coastline, including

Huntington Beach and Dana Point. It also comes more than a year after the Orange County Water District and Municipal Water District of Orange County formed an ad hoc committee to study the feasibility combining of operations.

Darcv Burke, spokeswoman for the Municipal Water District of Orange County, said the report "doesn't really change anything for us."

"It's encouraging us to do our job, which we're already doing," Burke told the Register on Friday. "It doesn't come with checkbook. It doesn't come with public support for those types of projects."

Still, Burke praised the thoroughness of the grand jury review and said the board of directors will issue a response as required by state law.

Shawn Dewane. president of the board of directors for the Orange County Water District, said

STAFF ARTIST

Desalination proposal

A recent grand jury report

Source: Orange County Grand Jury

HUNTINGTON identifies desalination BEACH Adams Ave. plants - such as this one proposed for Huntington Beach - as critical to Orange County's longterm Victoria St. strategy to deliver water to its residents and calls for an end to persistent delays in getting such plants online. Proposed Water storage AES desalination tank HUNTINGTON plant BEACH Pipe to desalination Water to desalination plant Huntington Beach

his board has not committed to desalination but voted 8-1 Wednesday to study the cost of buying water from the proposed desalination plant in Huntington Beach.

"We're still quite a ways from being able to make that kind of commitment," he said, adding that he feels the technology offers "tremendous promise."

With the plants estimated to cost between \$100 million and \$2 billion, money remains a key obstacle. But the grand jury likened the monthly ratepayer cost of paying for a desalination plant to a pricey cup of coffee.

The \$5 to \$7 increase that the San Diego County Water Authority is expecting its ratepayers to pay for the new plant in Carlsbad "is about the same as the cost of a Starbucks Venti, a small price to pay for a more secure water source," according to the report.

The report also dismissed environmentalists' concerns that building and operating the plants harms marine life.

"It is hard to believe that all of the marine life in the Pacific has migrated to a single intake location," according to the report, which noted that the effects outside a 200- to 1,000-foot radius of the discharge "are well within regulated values."

The grand jury, composed of 19 Orange County residents, convened last July to study water availability and make recommendations as part of an annual review.

"I think this is the next logical step in the evolution of how we will provide Orange County water in the future," Dewane said.

Desalination plants have long been criticized by environmentalists, including the Surfrider Foundation, which has unsuccessfully tried to stop the Carlsbad plant. The grand jury says it's time for them to step aside and let the plants be built while noting that environmental concerns "should be addressed to the extent they can be cost-effectively accommodated."

"However, OC residents should be granted a reasonable quality of life under adverse water supply

conditions. Yes, we could probably survive with half the water we currently use if we want to live without green spaces," the report reads. "No, we can't afford to wait for a long, drawn out (Bay Delta Conservation Plan) to achieve a compromised imported water solution."

A spokesman for the Surfrider Foundation could not be reached for comment Friday.

The report praises cities and water agencies for trying to find new sources of water and for paying to reinforce existing infrastructure, noting that "the low hanging fruit has already been picked."

"Unfortunately, new, large infrastructure projects have significant implementation costs, difficult permitting issues, and are usually contentious and highly politicized," the report reads. "OC water suppliers need the public's active involvement in supporting sustainable solutions to ensure a reasonable quality of life and to support economic growth."

The report recommends that a committee representing both water districts to advocate for streamlining the permitting process similar to what has been done with nuclear power plants through the Federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

But Burke questioned how that could happen.

"You have to understand: It's California. You don't move fast. Period," she said. "There's no such thing as streamlined CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act) for an ocean desalination plant."

She also said combining the two districts would require legislative approval because their agency goals differ.

"It's not as easy as everyone thinks," Burke said.

The report urged caution regarding the state's plan to restore the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta ecosystem, saying it's crucial to support it, "but OC should not rely solely on this option!"

Burke agreed.

"There is not one silver bullet to fix water reliability issues," Burke said. "It's really a portfolio approach of investment."

Like the Orange County Water District board, the Municipal Water District's board will review the report and issue a written response.

Dewane doesn't know what they'll say, but he said he hopes to see desalination plants built.

"There is simply not enough conservation that could be done to get us out of the drought position that we're in," Dewane said.

Beyond desalination, the report also lists other

measures to increase the county's potable water selfsufficiency. including: additional wastewater treatment and recycling; more aguifer replenishment, and transfer storage agreements with out-ofcounty sources; and the development of a water distribution model to figure out strategies to deliver water in a variety of outage scenarios.

WHERE DOES O.C. GET ITS WATER?

- The main wholesale supplier for imported water is the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which distributes water from two sources, the Colorado River Aqueduct and the State Water Project.
- The main wholesaler of locally sourced groundwater is the Orange County Water District. The Municipal Water District of Orange County and Orange County Water District are the major wholesale agencies distributing water to the local retail water districts and cities.

Other facts about water supply:

- North Orange County water districts have access to a large Santa Ana basin aquifer managed by the Orange County Water District. The aquifer supplies 65 to 80 percent of the north county's total water use.
- South Orange County districts, on average, import about 80 percent of their water, while North Orange County imports only about 20 percent of its water.
 Source: Orange County Grand Jury, 2013-14 report