

EDITORIALS

Answer for a thirsty county

Grand jury: Desalination would assure diversified water supply.

The Orange County grand jury recently reported that, while the county's water supply is improving, it lacks diversified water sources and continues to rely far too heavily on imported water.

No revelation there, especially for those who live in South County, but it was the solution for diversifying our water supply that was the most enticing aspect of the report.

"Locally sourced desalinated seawater, a nearly infinite supply, has significant merit and should be a primary candidate to ensure water supplies against climate change, drought or a catastrophic event," the grand jury wrote.

While northern parts of the county have an ample water supply in the Santa Ana basin aquifer, South County relies largely, about 80 percent, on imported water. In all, about 50 percent of the county's drinking water is imported, according to the report.

Four desalination projects are under development in Southern California, two in northern San Diego County and two in Orange County.

"These desalination projects have sufficient total capacity to replace about 20 percent of O.C.'s current water demand, or about 40 percent of imported water purchases," the grand jury wrote. "Unfortunately, new, large infrastructure projects have significant implementation costs, difficult permitting issues, and are usually contentious

and highly politicized."

Poseidon Water's proposed Huntington Beach plant is based on a design in Carlsbad that is already under construction and approved by the California Coastal Commission. The Huntington Beach project would produce 50 million gallons of freshwater every day – enough to supply 8 percent of county residents, officials say.

But the Poseidon project is still trying to overcome Coastal Commission hurdles. The company is working with commission staff to review the feasibility of alternative water-intake systems that none of the nearly 12,000 desalination plants of comparable size worldwide employ.

Environmentalists and the Coastal Commission say such systems will protect marine life. But researchers at Scripps Institution of Oceanography said the facility's effect on the marine environment would be "benign, and in principle, no different than the effects of natural evaporation."

The grand jury wondered how a catastrophic event would effect access to the water supply. It's certainly a worthy concern, but the effects that population growth in other Western states are already having on our imported water supply are clear. Our area receives less water from the Colorado River than ever before.

The Coastal Commission would do well to heed the grand jury's findings on the importance of desalination on water diversification.