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Editorial

OCWD should start talks on buying desal water

The Orange County Water District's board of directors will consider this evening whether the district should formally enter negotiations with Poseidon Resources to purchase the 56,000 acre-feet of water to be produced each year by its planned Huntington Beach Ocean Desalination Project.

Opponents of the project almost certainly will make their presence felt at the OCWD board meeting in Fountain Valley. But that should not dissuade the 10-member board from directing staff to work out a water purchase agreement with Poseidon, a private developer.

OCWD has been studying the project for a year and a half, and staff has concluded that the 50-million-gallon-a-day facility "offers a unique opportunity to reduce the need for imported water and improve the overall water supply reliability of the area."

Indeed, the plant's daily output of freshwater would meet the demand of roughly 300,000 individuals, equal to approximately 8 percent of the county's water needs.

Foes of the proposed desal plant suggest there are alternative means of adding 50 million gallons a day to the county's supply, among them, water conservation, recycling and reclamation, rainwater harvesting and low-impact development.

All of those suggestions are worth pursuing by OCWD at some level or another. But it is highly improbable they will yield the yearly 56,000 acre-feet of potable water that Poseidon would start delivering in 2018.

Moreover, because California is a drought-prone state, prudence demands that water districts statewide adopt an all-of-the-above approach to increasing supplies.

Water conservation and other such measures can make more efficient use of Orange County's existing supplies. But new supplies are absolutely essential if the nation's sixth-largest county is to keep pace with its population growth.

Indeed, we have seen the deleterious consequences when a county's infrastructure fails to keep up with population increases – congested freeways, overcrowded schools, insufficient housing stock and not enough parks and recreational areas.

Water is part of that equation just as surely as are freeways, schools, housing and parks. And the opportunity for OCWD to enter a public-private partnership with Poseidon that would add enough water to meet the demands of 8 percent of Orange County makes far too much sense for the district's board to do anything other than support negotiations on a water purchase agreement.