

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Jim Silva: Coastal Commission obstruction must end

By **JIM SILVA** / For the Register

After serving in elected office at the local, county and state level for a quarter-century, I've seen the partisanship divide grow deeper, which has reduced the efficacy of our elected officials and put more control of government in the hands of the bureaucracy. This reality was on full display at the recent Coastal Commission meeting I attended, where dozens of local, state and federal elected officials from both sides of the aisle streamed to the podium, and, with the best interest of their constituents in mind, urged the commission to approve the proposed Huntington Beach Seawater Desalination Facility.

Mired in the driest calendar year in California history, the state Department of Water Resources, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California and a host of Orange County water agencies encouraged the commission to approve a project that is needed to reduce Orange County's demand on water imported from Northern California by way of the State Water Project and the environmentally constrained Bay Delta.

Scientists testified to the project's insignificant effects on marine life. Yet, Coastal Commission staff dismissed these pleas from the elected representatives, public water officials and expert scientists and asked their commissioners to push the "restart" button on Poseidon – a water-supply reliability project that has been winding through the regulatory process for more than a decade while receiving the environmental green light from every required agency, including the State Lands Commission and Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The details of why the Coastal Commission staff wants to start the permitting process from scratch are transparent to all of those who attended the hearing. According to the staff, the concern is not the desalination facility's potential impact on sea lions, sharks or surfers. It's not even mackerel or minnows. No, the issue is 0.3 percent of the microscopic fish eggs and plankton that live in the water column and potentially could perish in the desalination plant's mechanical process.

Three tenths of 1 percent! That number is a *de minimis* level of impact that scientists employed by other state regulatory agencies determined would have an insignificant effect on the ecological system.

To avoid this insignificant impact, the commission staff and a few of its allies on the commission insisted that the project abandon the existing seawater-intake system and, instead, excavate the equivalent of more than 30 football fields of seafloor and beachfront at Huntington Beach to install a subsurface seawater intake system. This subsurface intake concept – where you bury the intake pumps in a giant gallery under the sand on the seafloor – has never been used on a large-scale desalination plant anywhere in the world. Recent studies concluded it was infeasible in very small plants considered in Long Beach and Santa Cruz.

What transpired at the Coastal Commission's November meeting was not a public hearing on the project's merits, it was a public execution conducted by a fringe movement that does not want to see California secure reliable water supplies, whether it's fixing the Sacramento Delta or having Southern California develop its own supplies.

Gov. Jerry Brown has released his State Water Strategy, which includes enhancing regional self-reliance through the development of new local supplies like seawater desalination. At the strategy's unveiling the governor proclaimed that he wants to “create action” and not “procrastinate further.” Here in Orange County, we have a project that has widespread bipartisan support from Republicans, Democrats, business, labor and residents throughout the county. It's environmentally sound.

If Gov. Brown is serious about allowing for the construction of water reliability projects then it's time the state's leaders end the paralysis by analysis and move forward with this project to provide a source of high quality reliable water for Orange County.

Jim Silva is a former state Assemblyman for the 67th District. He also was an Orange County supervisor and mayor of Huntington Beach



Gordana Kajer of Surfrider Foundation in Long Beach stands inside the filled Council Chambers in Newport Beach during the Coastal Commission meeting on Nov. 13.