

Name

Matt Koller

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Assignment

Policy Brief

Title

Monterey Peninsula Water Politics

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Overview

The Monterey Peninsula has long been water-stressed. State and local authorities and private-sector executives overseeing the Monterey District must address several systemic issues surrounding governance and water supply to ensure an adequate and reliable source of water for future generations.

There are two agencies primarily responsible for obtaining and providing water to customers in the Monterey District: the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District (MPWMD), a public agency, and California American Water (Cal Am), a publicly traded utility company.

MPWMD regulates water for the Monterey District, and was created in the late 1970s to oversee the water used by several cities on the peninsula and in the surrounding areas¹. It is their responsibility to ensure that the Monterey District receives an adequate supply of water, ensure water conservation practices are followed, and that environmental concerns are accounted for. Cal Am owns and operates the infrastructure necessary to deliver water to customers of the Monterey District.

Historically, most of the water provided to customers of the Monterey District has come from the Los Padres Reservoir, which dams the Carmel River and was built in 1949. However, the State Water Resources Control Board found in 1995 that Cal Am was extracting more water than was legally permissible from the reservoir, and ordered Cal Am to scale back its extraction and identify alternative sources of water. One of those alternative sources of water was the Seaside Groundwater Basin, a nearby underground aquifer since tapped to provide water to the Monterey District.

Despite the additional water source from the Seaside Groundwater Basin, Cal Am has continued to exceed its withdrawal quota from the Los Padres Dam. Compounding the issue is that enough silt has accumulated in the reservoir to reduce its capacity by almost half². As such, it is of extreme importance for Cal Am to identify an alternative source of water for the Monterey District. There are two alternative sources of water: a proposed desalination plant and investing in recycled water.

Issue: Desalination Plant. A desalination plant would allow Cal Am to extract saltwater, treat it, and provide it to its customers. While simple in concept, there are several challenges associated with this plan, most of which are related to local resistance to the project.

Cal Am has obtained the permitting necessary to build a desalination plant, but has yet to obtain the permits needed to extract seawater. Cal Am services several cities on the Monterey Peninsula, but is seeking to obtain its saltwater from a brackish underground aquifer in the nearby city of Marina. There are several issues associated with this proposal.

Marina's water is sourced from underground freshwater aquifers, which are located next to the brackish aquifers Cal Am is targeting. Residents are concerned that tapping the brackish aquifer will taint their freshwater stores or cause Cal Am to inadvertently tap into their freshwater stores, reducing Marina's water security.

Marina residents are also concerned about where the brine resulting from desalination will be discharged. This highly salinated effluent could be released into the ocean (affecting marine life) or into their nearby watersheds

(possibly polluting freshwater stores with salty water). Opponents of the desalination project have taken a “NIMBY” approach to the desalination plant: they are loath to host a water treatment plant that would benefit their wealthier neighbors, but not them.

Solution: The primary issue with the Marina desalination plant is that it is sourcing and treating water in a region that it does not service. While building a desalination plant elsewhere would not be without its own challenges, Cal Am could justify the project if it were closer to—or ideally located within—the Monterey District that it is charged with serving, since those living close to the desalination plant would also benefit from drinking its water. Cal Am should therefore commission additional studies to assess the viability of constructing the desalination plant elsewhere, or partner with the Marina Water District to share the water generated from the desalination plant.

Issue: Partnership with Pure Water Monterey. During California’s 2011-2017 drought, the Monterey Peninsula saw a drastic decrease in its water consumption due to strict conservation measures, which included recycling wastewater by Pure Water Monterey (formerly known as the Monterey Regional Water Pollution Control Agency) into potable water that was discharged into the Seaside Groundwater Basin for subsequent extraction.

Solution: There are few drawbacks to this option, aside from the investment necessary to scale the projects up to a size that would provide sufficient water to the Monterey District. Indeed, Dave Stoldt, General Manager of the MRWMD stated in a May 2020 report³ that Monterey District water needs could be met without a desalination plant: extracting its allowance from the Los Padres Reservoir, the Seaside Groundwater Basin, and the recharge from Pure Water Monterey projects would meet the needs of the Monterey District. Significant investments should therefore be made to significantly increase the capabilities of wastewater recycling infrastructure.

Summary and Recommendation

Voters passed a 2018 ballot measure to assess the feasibility of taking Cal Am public, a measure that has been voted on several times since 1934⁴. Cal Am should be declared fit for sale, and water should be regulated by a government agency that is solely concerned with the public interest.

The resulting public water agency should commission additional studies to assess whether a desalination plant is needed, or if conservation measures and recycled water can meet the needs of the Monterey District. If a desalination plant is needed, it should be built within the geographic boundaries of the Monterey District or form a partnership with the Marina Coast Water District to assess whether the plant could also provide resources to Marina residents.

The public water agency should work with local and state officials to permanently enact drought-period water conservation measures, and fund additional programs with Pure Water Monterey, and invest in infrastructure to recapture and recycle wastewater and stormwater to ensure that the Monterey District is using water as efficiently as possible.

In order to sustainably provide water to residents of the Monterey District, a public takeover of Cal Am is necessary. The resulting agency should immediately enact conservation measures and reduce the amount of

water drawn from the Los Padres Reservoir, assess the feasibility of alternative desalination projects, and ensure that the water provided to residents is used efficiently and recycled.

References

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