



PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: March 23, 2016

Contact:

Kira Redmond, Executive Director, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper (805) 563-3377 ext.1
kira@sbck.org

City of Santa Barbara Denies Plea by Environmental Group to Revise Study on Environmental Improvements to Desalination

Santa Barbara, CA - Yesterday, the Santa Barbara City Council denied a plea by environmental watchdog Santa Barbara Channelkeeper to revise a study of the feasibility of alternatives to make the City's desalination plant less environmentally harmful, which Channelkeeper contends was intentionally designed to find alternatives infeasible.

At yesterday's City Council meeting, City staff presented the findings of a recent study that was meant to assess the feasibility of utilizing subsurface intakes to draw seawater into the desalination plant. The study was done because Channelkeeper pressured the City to examine these alternatives out of concern for the harmful impacts to marine life that will be caused by the desalination plant as it is currently configured. Channelkeeper convinced the Regional Water Board to require the City to do the study as a condition of a permit the City needed to move forward with reactivating the desal plant.

The City's desalination plant, which was built during the last drought and then promptly mothballed when heavy rains made its water economically infeasible, is currently being recommissioned to produce 3,125 acre-feet per year (AFY) of water using a screened open ocean intake. Originally estimated to cost less than \$18 million, the price tag for the reactivation has climbed to \$55 million and may still go up.

Open ocean intakes are widely known to suck in and kill massive numbers of marine organisms, which drove the State Water Resources Control Board to enact policies to phase out their use in coastal power plants in 2010 and in desalination plants in 2015. Subsurface intakes, which use sand as a natural filter by drawing seawater in from beneath the surface, virtually eliminate marine life mortality and are the preferred intake technologies being advanced by the new statewide desalination policy. That policy requires new and expanded desalination plants in California to utilize subsurface intakes to minimize marine life mortality unless they are thoroughly demonstrated to be infeasible.

As a result of intense lobbying by City staff and their paid consultants, the City managed to secure an exemption from the state policy, but Channelkeeper has nonetheless vigorously lobbied the City to consider the possibility of using a subsurface intake instead of the open ocean

intake, which the City's own studies suggest will kill trillions of marine organisms EVERY DAY.

At yesterday's hearing, Channelkeeper testified that the study had been deliberately designed to ensure that subsurface intakes came out looking infeasible, by defining "feasible" as capable of producing 10,000 AFY – more than three times the 3,125 AFY the plant is currently being recommissioned to produce. Based on information presented in the study, had "feasible" been defined as capable of producing 3,125 AFY, then it would have likely shown that five of the six subsurface intake technologies examined are indeed feasible.

Channelkeeper's Executive Director, Kira Redmond, said, "It's a real shame that more than \$1 million of taxpayer money was spent to create cover for Santa Barbara's decision not to reduce the substantial impact on the marine environment that desalination will have."

Channelkeeper asked the Council to go back and fix the study so the City and its ratepayers could have a useful and realistic assessment of whether a subsurface intake could feasibly be built in order to avoid killing massive amounts of marine life. The Council declined.

Ms. Redmond says Channelkeeper is not giving up. "We will lobby the Regional Water Board to require the City to revise the study. And we're holding the City accountable for its actions. The public deserves to know how the City is spending public money and how it is addressing – or not addressing – the serious environmental consequences of desalination. We hope others will join us in demanding a fair and honest assessment of ways the City might deal with those consequences."

###

Santa Barbara Channelkeeper is a grassroots non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the Santa Barbara Channel and its watersheds through science-based advocacy, education, field work and enforcement. Learn more about SBCK at www.sbck.org