

Groups appeal pilot desal plant
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Herald Staff Report

Permission to build a pilot water desalination plant at Moss Landing has been appealed by a public interest group, which says the design of the facility could be "detrimental to sensitive marine habitats."

Officials from California American Water say the appeal will likely delay the operation of the pilot plant and will aggravate the environmental harm now taking place on the Carmel River.

Cal Am received a coastal permit from the county's acting Zoning Administrator Jeff Main on July 13. The utility, which wants to build a full-scale desalination plant to reduce pumping from the Carmel River, still needs approval from the state Coastal Commission and Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board for its small test plant, which would be located at the Moss Landing power plant.

The pilot plant would operate out of a 6,500-square-foot facility and use a small fraction of the water taken daily from Monterey Bay for operation. County planners determined that the pilot plant would pose no significant environmental impact, but representatives for Environment Now, a Santa Monica group, and the Surfrider Foundation claim that more environmental studies should be completed.

They say that existing scientific studies on the "once-through cooling" system the Moss Landing plant would employ indicate that the systems create environmental problems.

In a letter to Monterey County last month, the groups said that their "concerns are not unfounded or speculative" and that the state Coastal Commission found "substantial" issue with Monterey County's approval of a similar pilot desalination plant proposed by the Pajaro/Sunny Mesa Water District.

Cal Am spokeswoman Catherine Bowie said the appeal will delay operation of the utility's test plant. The permit was due for Coastal Commission consideration later this month, but the permit must now be considered on appeal by the Board of Supervisors.

"The longer we are delayed, the more harm is caused to the environment," she said. The state has determined that the utility's pumping of water from the Carmel River is harmful to the river's habitat and has ordered the company to find a replacement supply as quickly as possible.

"Progress on the Coastal Water Project is the most important thing that can be done to protect our environment," Bowie said.

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