



JENKINS: Desal is a slam-dunk

6 a.m., Nov. 25, 2012

Eight years ago, Matt Hall, then a councilman and now mayor of Carlsbad, gave me the dope on desal.

It boils down to time and money, he said.

As sure as summer will be hot and dry, imported water from the Sacramento Delta and the Colorado River will become more scarce while the SoCal population inexorably grows.

Supply dwindles, demand swells.

There's an economic law in there somewhere.

Over time, Hall predicted, desalinated water, as pricey as Perrier, will start looking more and more affordable.

I asked Hall how long he thought it would take for the two lines on the graph — the cost of importing water and the cost of desal — to get within hailing distance.

Somewhere between six and nine years, he said.

In other words, about now.

If winks and nods and bureaucratic signals are any indication, the San Diego County Water Authority will give the green light this week to San Diego's first commercial desalination plant.

You know the fix is in when the San Diego County Taxpayers Association hands down its data-based endorsement. The numbers add up, the pro-business bean counters say.

Though it's unlikely enviro-puritans will pick up their legal briefs and go surfing, you can take it to the bank: Poseidon Resources Group will stick a historic straw into the Pacific at the mouth of Carlsbad's Agua Hedionda Lagoon. Desal is a slam-dunk.

To which I can think of only one response: Hallelujah.

Environmentalists will fret about fish kills from the intake — or devils in the desal's details — but the region, which loves the idea of desalination, is thirsty for the purified water. (Eight years ago, a survey showed 80 percent approval.)

A month or so before I compared notes with Hall, I quaffed a bottle of pilot water at Poseidon's reverse-osmosis demonstration plant. If anything, the clear liquid was notable for its lack of taste,

which in water is a virtue. It was like something you'd drink out of a beaker on a space station. Chemically perfect.

I had the same palate reaction to a glass of toilet-to-tap (i.e., recycled sewage) water in the '90s at a tiny demonstration plant in the San Pasqual Valley.

Turns out here's little mystery about creating peerless H₂O. The only challenge is the cost.

No matter how much we recycle sewage or scrub out the salt of ocean water or preserve every drop like a miserly Scrooge, our collective lips will always be parched because there are too damned many of us and we won't stop playing golf and singing the long version of "Light My Fire" in the shower.

Most of us moved here for a reason and it wasn't to be dry farmers. We came to enjoy life in an unnaturally sustained metropolis.

To survive without austerity, San Diego must think of itself as an island, not a cul-de-sac dependent upon the outside world for water and power and, while we're at it, international air transport.

Our biggest, brightest ideas are the ones that further self-reliance. We should install solar panels the way we've seeded lawns. We should have moved the airport to Miramar a half-century ago — and still should.

The Poseidon desal plant, argued to the point of exhaustion, will be approved because the time is ripe. The deal is hedged, financially and politically. The risk is with Poseidon if the water factory turns into an engineering disaster. All San Diego is doing is saying that we're willing to pay through the nose for up to a tenth of our water supply so long as we know it's going to be there, come hell or high water.

As it turns out, sun-scorched hell we're ready for.

High water, on the other hand, may be a problem.

Superstorm Sandy has put the East Coast on warning. How close to the ocean's edge is safe in light of the rising tide of climate change?

The irony would be excruciating if one of SoCal's major solutions to climate change would itself fall victim to the ocean's rise.

A precious few, however, might take pleasure in the purging.

Almost 60 years ago, mystery writer Ross Macdonald, in the guise of private eye Lew Archer, swam in the Pacific and thought of nature's ultimate revenge:

The ocean "was as close as I ever got to cleanliness and freedom, as far as I ever got from all the people. They had jerry-built the beaches from San Diego to the Golden Gate, bulldozed superhighways through the mountains, cut down a thousand years of redwood growth, and built an urban wilderness in the desert. They poured their sewage into it, but it couldn't be tainted.

"There was nothing wrong with Southern California that a rise in the ocean level couldn't cure."

logan.jenkins@utsandiego.com (760) 752-6756