

Desalination plant on course for 2016

\$1B Carlsbad project will help protect region against drought

By David Garrick 6:41 p.m. Jan. 7, 2014



This image provided by the San Diego County Water Authority shows an artist rendering of a proposed desalination plant, center right, superimposed over an aerial photograph, in Carlsbad, Calif. The proposed plant will be the Western Hemisphere's largest desalination plant. (AP Photo/San Diego County Water Authority) — AP

CARLSBAD — One year after construction began, the \$1 billion Carlsbad desalination plant is under budget and on schedule to begin producing 50 million gallons of drinking water per day when it opens in 2016, officials said Wednesday.

The 6-acre plant is nearly 25 percent complete and similar progress has been made on 10 miles of thick pipe that will connect it to the San Diego County Water Authority's aqueduct in San Marcos, officials said Wednesday during a news conference and tour of the project.

Reporters and photographers at the event watched a small army of construction workers use large cranes and bulldozers to dig trenches and hoist 30-foot-tall water

filter racks into place. The plant, on the coast next to the Encina Power Station, will eventually reach nine stories below ground — the largest and most technologically advanced desalination plant in the Western Hemisphere, said Poseidon Water chief executive Carlos Riva.

The project's goal is giving the San Diego region a more reliable and less costly source for drinking water by purifying salt water from the Pacific Ocean by reverse osmosis.

"We'll produce enough water to meet the daily needs of 300,000 San Diego residents," said Peter MacLaggan, a Poseidon senior vice president. "We'll have at least one water supply that's drought-proof — it won't matter whether it snows in the Rockies or rains in the Sierras."

Local water rates have steadily risen in recent years because of drought and the increasing cost of importing water from Northern California. Officials say the plant, which is projected to produce 7 to 10 percent of the region's water, will reduce reliance on other sources.

The water authority, Poseidon's partner on the project, will have reduced the percentage of water it imports into San Diego from 90 percent in 1990 to 40 percent when the plant opens in 2016.

"We will have one more spoke in the wheel" of diversifying the local water supply, Tom Wornham, chairman of the authority, said Wednesday.

Recycling sewer water into drinking water will hopefully be the next spoke, he said.

The plant got a huge boost just before construction began last winter, when the water authority and the 24 local agencies it represents agreed to buy water from the desalination plant.

But critics have said there's no guarantee the plant will save local water customers money, and the water authority hasn't yet determined how much the plant will increase water rates for individual agencies.

The cost of desalinated water is expected to initially be higher than imported water. But with imported water prices rising an average of 8 percent a year, desalinated water is expected to be cheaper long-term, officials have said.

"We project it to be competitive," said Frank Belock, a deputy general manager at the water authority. "But until it starts operating in 2016, we can't say that with 100 percent certainty."

Marco Gonzalez, an attorney for the Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation, predicted Wednesday that the water authority's decision on rates later this year will be controversial.

“No one knows who will pay for this water,” said Gonzalez, who previously tried to block construction of the plant along with the Surfrider Foundation. “I guarantee this will be the actual important story about that plant in the upcoming months.”

Gonzalez and Surfrider have also complained the plant will perpetuate the damage to marine life that the neighboring power station has done by sucking in large amounts of sea water.

On Wednesday, officials from Poseidon and the water authority focused instead on all the progress they’ve made since breaking ground in December 2012.

Nearly three miles of the 10-mile pipeline connecting the plant to the aqueduct have been installed, Belock said.

Crews in the east have made their way from San Marcos to the Vista/Carlsbad border, while crews in the west have reached Cannon Road, he said. The remaining 7-mile gap mile is scheduled to be closed by late 2014, with crews projected to meet near El Camino Real.

Carlsbad Mayor Matt Hall called the progress “miraculous” and compared digging the pipeline to “taking a needle and thread and weaving it through a piece of fabric.”

MacLaggan said he’s gotten tremendous positive feedback about the plant, explaining that ocean water seems like an obvious solution to Southern California’s drought problems.

“The public keeps asking why we didn’t do this sooner,” he said.

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