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Reliable water is San Diego's lifeblood; desalination plan cannot die now

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It is no exaggeration to say that political leaders from throughout the region have a decision to make on Thursday that will significantly impact the economy and the quality of life throughout San Diego County. Board members of the San Diego County Water Authority, representing two dozen separate water agencies in the region, will decide the fate of a \$1 billion plan, more than 12 years in the making, to build what would be the largest and most technologically advanced desalination plant in the United States.

The reasons to move forward are compelling. But the issues involved are weighty and a decision in favor is hardly considered a slam dunk.

Some history is in order.

In 1991, San Diego County produced just 5 percent of the water it needed each year. The remaining 95 percent – 552,000 acre-feet, or nearly 180 billion gallons – was all purchased from the giant Metropolitan Water District, the Los Angeles-based wholesaler of water for virtually all of Southern California. And that was more than twice the amount of MWD water that San Diego County actually had rights to; we were buying water for which the other MWD agencies held the legal rights but did not need.

So not only were nearly all of San Diego County's eggs in one water basket, but we were extremely vulnerable should other agencies start demanding their full water rights in case of drought or other shortage.

Which is exactly what happened in the early 1990s when drought forced the state to cut water supplies to the MWD, which in turn cut allocations to the water authority here by more than 30 percent for more than a year. Longtime San Diego residents may remember the mandatory water rationing and the "water police."

Officials rightly vowed not to let that happen again and began efforts to diversify supplies. The most significant developments were a hard-fought agreement to purchase Colorado River water from the Imperial Irrigation District, along with lining of the All-American and Coachella canals.

Today, the amount of water purchased from the MWD has been chopped to 45 percent, with a CWA goal of reducing MWD water to 30 percent by 2020.

That's where desalination comes in. The CWA partnership with Poseidon Resources to build a plant adjacent to the old Encina Power Station in Carlsbad, capable of taking water from the sea and producing 50 million gallons a day of high-quality drinking water, is critical to that plan.

But the plant, and the necessary miles of new or refurbished pipeline needed to deliver the water to the CWA system, are not cheap. And that's where the difficult decisions come in.

At the CWA meeting Thursday, board members will be asked to do two things: approve a highly detailed and complex agreement with Poseidon for purchase of the desalinated water; and to launch a study of several different "cost of service" plans, one of which would ultimately be adopted next year and would determine the price that the 24 CWA members pay.

As highlighted in a commentary written by Gary Arant, general manager of the Valley Center Municipal Water District and published on the U-T San Diego Opinion page on Sunday, there is significant disagreement between the smaller water agencies within the CWA and the larger agencies like the city of San Diego over what alternative pricing plans to include in the cost-of-service study. Millions are at stake for each of the agencies and their customers.

There is zero time for delay. Poseidon, which would lease acreage for the desal plant from NRG Energy, which owns the Encina Power Station, has been served notice by NRG that no more time extensions will be granted. If there is no CWA board approval of the project on Thursday, the Poseidon lease will expire on Friday.

And that, says Poseidon executive Peter MacLaggan, would almost certainly mean the entire project is dead.

After literally a dozen years of planning, obtaining permits and fighting – and winning – numerous court battles, this project cannot be allowed to die now.

There is a solution, and we hope the CWA board members will follow it. We urge CWA board members to approve the agreement with Poseidon so it can meet its end-of-the month deadline, retain its lease with NRG, finalize financing and prepare for construction. And all the competing pricing plans should be included in the cost-of-service study. Board members can then fight it out next year once the study is completed and the precise impact on each agency is known.

A reliable supply of water that is immune to prolonged drought or the political machinations of a water wholesaler in Los Angeles is the economic lifeblood of this semiarid region at the bottom of California.

This project must go forward.