

# State needs to be realistic, flexible on pumping options

Monterey Herald - 4/11/08

By DALE HEKHUIS  
Guest Commentary

In February, the state Water Resources Control Board issued a draft cease-and-desist order directing California American Water to drastically reduce its overpumping of the Carmel River. A summary of the order's origins is pertinent today as the board holds a public hearing on the matter.

In 1987, four complaints were filed with the state board alleging that Cal Am's diversions from the river were harming public resources including the steelhead

population and that there was a question of whether Cal Am had certain water rights.

No action was taken until 1992 when hearings were held on water rights and on the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District's application for the new Los Padres Dam Project.

In July 1995, the state board issued Order 95-10, which made three key findings.

First, that the underflow in the Carmel River is a subterranean stream and therefore subject to regulation by the board.

Second, that Cal Am was diverting more than 14,000 acre-feet annually.

Third, that the diversions were having an adverse effect on the riparian corridor. The board said then that it could mandate Cal Am to reduce pumping to 3,376 acre-feet unless projects were implemented to reduce pumping.

These findings set the stage for setting forth some 13 conditions, the most important of which was that Cal Am was required to reduce its pumping to 11,285 acre-feet, which brings us to the current draft order. The baseline in the draft order for measuring future reductions is precisely 11,285 acre-feet.

One final bit of history. In November 1995 a public vote turned down public financing of the dam.

The draft cease-and-desist order gets a high grade for alerting the community to the seriousness of the long-term overpumping of the river but a low grade for attempting to deal with the pumping with an excessively heavy hand. The draft order directs Cal Am to reduce its overpumping by 50 percent or 5,642 acre-feet over seven years.

This means that at least 5,642 acre-feet of replacement water must be found. (By way of perspective, the city of Monterey's total water consumption was 3,782

acre-feet in 2007).

The problem is there isn't any replacement water to be found. Neither Cal Am nor the water management district has identified any source for replacement water.

The immediate question, then, is what would be the impact if the draft order was to go into effect as is. Call that Option 1. The required first-year reduction would be 15 percent or 1,700 acre-feet. This would require mandated rationing of at least 15 percent to provide the replacement water. The schedule would then require additional reductions until 50 percent reduction, 5,642 acre-feet, was reached in the seventh year. Generating the replacement water would then require mandated rationing at 50 percent.

Rationing at this level would obviously have some very serious impacts on the economy and lifestyles. Particularly hard hit would be the tourism, construction and gardening sectors. It is not an overstatement to say that tourism is the lifeblood of the Peninsula's economy.

Second, the lifestyles of residents would be degraded due to sharp restrictions on water use. Rationing at such a high level could have some unforeseen consequences for the health and safety of the population.

The good news is that there is a potential way out of this mess if there is a political will to pursue it.

Call it Option 2: a new water supply project, such as a 6,000 acre-foot desalination plant. The water management district has had plans for a desal plant on the shelf for several years. It was earlier

sized at 8,400 acre-feet and could be straightforwardly downsized to 6,000 acre-feet. In my opinion, it could be updated, permitted and constructed within five years.

An important complement to Option 2 would be a conservation project. An additional source of replacement water would be needed while the desalination plant is under construction.

The conservation contribution would be moderate, on the order of 1,500 acre-feet.

Reflecting this amount of conserved water, the pumping reduction schedule would be radically different from that in Option 1. In this case, the pumping reduction would start at 100 acre-feet in the first year and increase by 100 acre-feet per year through the fifth year. The proposed desalination plant would take over the job of generating the full amount of replacement water — 5,642 acre-feet — in either the sixth or seventh year depending on the completion of construction.

*Dale Hekhuis was a member of the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District board from 1990 to 1993 and is a former chairman. He is retired from General Electric Capital Corp.*

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## If you go

- > **What:** Public hearing
- > **When:** 1 p.m. today
- > **Where:** De Anza I room of the Portola Hotel and Spa at Monterey Bay, 2 Portola Plaza, downtown Monterey