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EDITORIAL

By Bill Swichtenberg



Taking the Salt Out

The recent drought conditions in the United States as well as concern over water availability have led to increased interest in desalination. More than 97 percent of the water on Earth is saltwater.

Five large municipal water agencies have combined to advocate a significantly increased federal role in encouraging desalination. The group sees desalination as a viable, cost-effective way of making seawater and brackish groundwater reliable sources to supplement national drinking water supplies.

The United States Desalination Coalition plans to ask Congress to approve legislation aimed at providing financial incentives and grants for the development of desalination treatment facilities. At the outset, members of the coalition are composed of five large water agencies in California. Members are City of Los Angeles Department of Water & Power, Municipal Water District of Orange County, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, San Diego Water Authority and West Basin Municipal Water District.

While desalination once was a prohibitively expensive alternative, both capital and operating costs have been cut in half over the decade, making this option much more competitive. At the same time, contamination and scarcity have made the alternatives more expensive. The result is that the market for desalination equipment and membranes is forecasted to rise from \$1.1 billion this year to \$1.8 billion in 2007, according to the McIlvaine Co.

Desalination is not just a pipe dream. Projects are being completed. On March 16, Tampa Bay Water's desalination plant produced its first 3 million gallons. It is expected to hit its capacity of 25 million gallons per day by mid-April. At that point it will be the largest desalination plant in the nation.

The \$110 million plant was the result of four years of planning and 18 months of construction. By building next to the Tampa Electric Co.'s Big Bend plant, money was saved. The plant uses saltwater from the bay for cooling, so the desal plant could draw 44 million gallons of the discharge rather than building its own intake pipes. The plan was made possible by the Southwest Florida Management District agreeing to use taxpayers' money to pay for 90 percent of the construction cost. The result is the cheapest desal water in the world (\$1.88 per thousand gallons).

Like Tampa, the Desalination Coalition hopes for a new supply of clean water. "Our coalition will grow as water agencies in other states learn about our goals and approach," Coalition executive director and former senior official in the Reagan Interior Department Hal Furman said. "The need for a new, reliable supply of clean water extends across the nation."

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