

Why we decided against the post-Katrina desal model

By Gail Robinette and Muril Clift

Hindsight isn't always 20-20. Sometimes it plays tricks on you, oversimplifying the past and leaving out key details that explain why certain decisions were made.

Such is the case with some of the recent "Why didn't we try that?" questions we have heard regarding actions taken by the CCSD to deal with Cambria's severe drought. Options that we considered and rejected have re-emerged as proposals that, to some, look like better choices.

One of these was to bring in a temporary, portable desal plant, just as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) did after the Katrina disaster in 2005. Former CCSD Director Allan MacKinnon, whose wisdom and record of service we greatly respect, made his case for this alternative in the July 31 edition of *The Cambrian*. While it was not the option we chose, we did consider the pros and cons before ruling it out, and we would like to respond.

The pros, such as the track record of the technology, were clear, but were outweighed by the cons.

To address some of the most significant:

-- Post-Katrina style portable desal is *seawater* desal, with all the related downsides. Setting up an emergency unit would have required direct seawater intake and brine outflow pipes, both of which would intrude into a federal marine sanctuary and would cross State Park land. The regulatory hurdles to getting such a project approved quickly would have been enormous.

-- Regulators sometimes ease up on the red tape in an emergency, but we could not assume that they would bend the rules for Cambria. While we have a real problem, it does not compare to the Katrina disaster.

--The cost of an off-the-shelf, portable desal unit looked relatively low at first glance, but it did not include infrastructure expenditures: grading, pipelines, electric power, safety measures, connection outlays, and regulatory costs. And in the end, the plant would go away, leaving us nothing to show for our investment and still no water security for the future.

-- Because this option was only temporary, debt financing was out of the question. We would have had to pay for it in cash, drawing on dwindling reserves with no clear idea of what the ultimate cost would be.

-- Also, we did not know, and still do not know, how long this drought will last. Renting a desal system makes sense in a severe, short-term crisis such as the Katrina catastrophe.

In contrast, Cambria's drought is in its third year and may extend into a fourth. The cost of a temporary fix can soar when a crisis drags on or keeps recurring.

We chose to spend the money on a permanent emergency solution that would provide long-term water security in the event of inevitable droughts, major breakdowns in our aging infrastructure, and/or possible natural disasters. We stand by that decision as the right one for Cambria, now and in the future.

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