

Citing drought, California town rushes water plant

January 3 2015, by Ellen Knickmeyer



In an Oct. 2, 2014 photo, Jim Tuzzio sprays non-potable water used for dust control and compaction at the site of a roughly 3-acre evaporation pond that will hold brine from the desalination plant, in Cambria, Calif. The oceanside resort town of Cambria is opening the plant under a state drought-emergency declaration, using a novel mix of brackish estuary water, fresh water, and more than a bit of recycled sewage wastewater. (AP Photo/The Tribune (of San Luis Obispo), David Middlecamp)

California's drought declaration has triggered only local limits such as restrictions on washing cars or watering lawns for most communities, but

one Pacific Coast tourist town has seized it as an opportunity to build a long-desired desalination plant.

The new project will turn salty water to drinking water for the 6,000-resident town of Cambria, which hugs the cliffs of the central coast, 6 miles south of William Randolph Hearst's famous castle at San Simeon. It is one of the biggest infrastructure projects undertaken in response to Gov. Jerry Brown's drought emergency decree last year.

The plant is expected to go online early this month after being finished in just six months, unusually fast in California. Projects of this sort typically take years, and often decades, of environmental reviews, public hearings and lawsuits.

Dozens of other cities and towns over the years have considered desalination plants as the way out of water shortages. Critics, however, say the technology is expensive, energy intensive and produces huge amounts of brine waste that damages the environment. California has 11 other desalination plants, and another 16 proposed.

Citing Brown's drought declaration, San Luis Obispo County and local Cambria officials announced the water-plant project in May and finished it by December.

The project, which uses a novel mix of fresh water, estuary water and highly treated sewage wastewater, will be capable of providing about a third of the town's water demand. It makes Cambria one of the first communities in the state to recycle sewage wastewater as an eventual drinking-water source.

Brown's emergency declaration significantly cut through the usual advance state scrutiny for projects, including the public hearings, said Harvey Packard, supervising engineer for the state's Central Coast Water

Quality Control Board. In waving the project through, water board officials had been "clear this is exactly what the governor had in mind with the proclamation," Packard said.

A California Natural Resources Agency spokesman said the emergency decree supports Cambria's action, but did not specifically direct it. The declaration ordered state officials to assist communities in need of water, measures called for "under the extraordinary circumstances of the worst drought in 40 years," Richard Stapler said in an email.



In an Oct. 2, 2014 photo, the Cambria Community Services District works on a desalination plant, in Cambria, Calif. Drought has lowered water levels in the district. Water for the desalination plant under construction will enter the plant in

the foreground and go through a series of processes. Cambria is opening the plant under a state drought-emergency declaration, using a novel mix of brackish estuary water, fresh water, and more than a bit of recycled sewage wastewater. (AP Photo/The Tribune (of San Luis Obispo), David Middlecamp)

California has suffered under some of its driest conditions on record in recent years. Winter rains have somewhat eased the drought statewide, but experts say it's far from over.

Cambria desalination plant supporters aren't apologizing for the emergency rush. Town water officials have battled for a desalination plant since the 1990s and the community has cut residential use rates by 40 percent—twice the rate Brown asked of all state residents in an emergency water-saving plan.

The drought has helped kill off one-quarter of the 3,000 acres of rare Monterey pines for which Cambria is known, and short water supplies overall have impeded development and helped keep the town's population at a standstill this decade.

Mark Rochefort, a retired trial lawyer in Cambria, did his part, keeping a bucket in the shower and using that water to flush toilets and water plants.

"Once this project is up and operating and we have a couple weather cycles ... I think people who were opposed to it will look back on it and say this hasn't been a dramatic change for Cambria," Rochefort said.

Cambria water officials signed a \$13 million loan for the project, and district customers will bear part of the cost through rate increases.

The project for now will dump the ocean brine produced by the desalination into a man-made pond. The water district is now obtaining what's expected to be a \$2.67 million insurance policy to cover any leaks, in one of the last steps required by the state before the plant goes online for customers, district spokesman Tom Gray said.

Authorities have allowed the water district to obtain some permits as it goes and others after the plant is in operation.

A local citizens group sued the Cambria water district in October, saying authorities improperly skipped over environmental safeguards.

State Coastal Commission officials warned the water district in July that the plant raised significant policy concerns.

Some opponents say they fear the new water plant will help trigger a building boom on that stretch of the coast, particularly if surrounding communities make deals to acquire some of the newly available water.

Connie Gannon, a Cambria resident and fifth-generation Californian, says she opposes the plant as unnecessary for those prepared to live within the means of a semi-arid state.

"Whether there's an emergency or not," she said, "... it doesn't have an impact on the lives of people who are used to living in California with a limited water base."

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