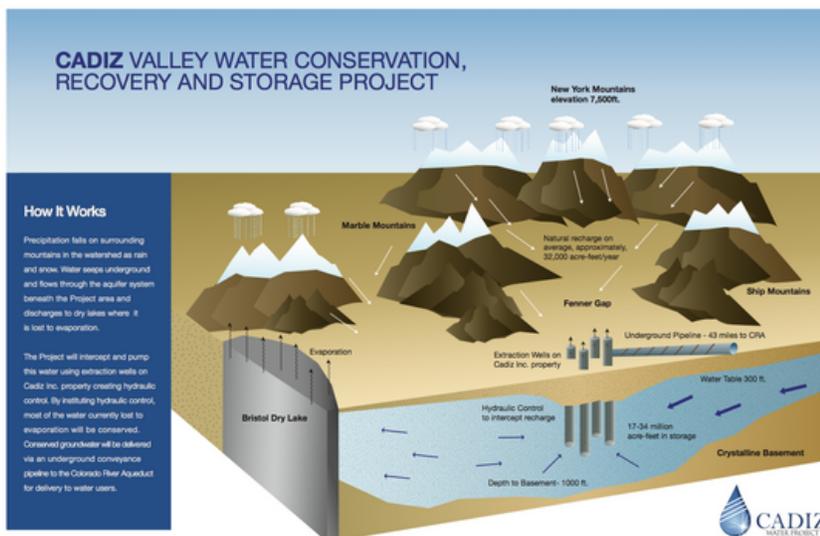


Newsom signs bill requiring further environmental review for Cadiz project

Shane Newell and Sam Metz, Palm Springs Desert Sun | Published 9:03 p.m. PT July 31, 2019 | Updated 3:14 p.m. PT Aug. 1, 2019



Cadiz Inc. diagrams how their water pumping project would work. (Photo: Courtesy of Cadiz Inc.)

A bill signed Wednesday evening by Gov. Gavin Newsom will require Cadiz Inc.'s Mojave Desert groundwater pumping project to undergo further review to prove it will not harm the surrounding environment.

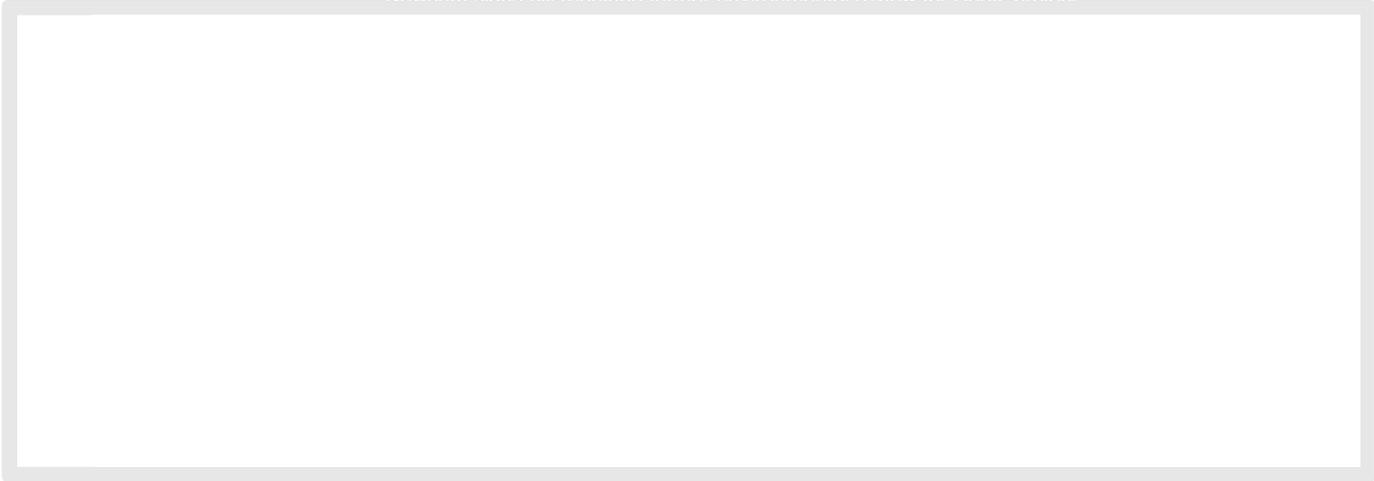
The bill, SB 307, was authored by Sen. Richard Roth, D-Riverside, and cleared the Assembly earlier this month. It requires the State Lands Commission to determine that projects involving the transfer of water from a groundwater basin won't adversely impact the surrounding environment.

"Water has flowed underneath the Mojave for thousands of years, sustaining the Native Americans, bighorn sheep, the threatened desert tortoise and a variety of other plant and animal life that have made the Mojave Desert their home," Newsom said in a statement. "Prior to allowing any project to move forward, there must be certainty that it will not threaten the important natural and cultural resources."

Cadiz and its detractors have fought in both court and the state Legislature over the project. In 2016, the groundwater project became one of the many battlegrounds upon which the Trump administration and California have clashed after Trump's Interior Department decided to exempt it from the federal review the Obama administration had subjected it to.

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Cadiz has proposed extracting water from below the Mojave Desert for more than two decades. The company's current project proposes pumping more than 16 billion gallons ([/story/news/2019/06/21/judge-tosses-back-federal-exemption-cadiz-water-project-mojave/1529229001/](https://www.desertsun.com/story/news/2019/06/21/judge-tosses-back-federal-exemption-cadiz-water-project-mojave/1529229001/)) of groundwater from an aquifer under the Mojave Desert across public lands to the Colorado River Aqueduct to transport it to thirsty Californians. The company has projected the project could earn it \$2.4 billion.

The project's supporters and detractors cite competing scientific studies about whether the project's extraction plan exceeds the aquifer's natural resource rate and damage the surrounding environment. Cadiz argues that it passed the stringent review mandated by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and cites scientific studies it commissioned, which determined the project wouldn't have a detrimental effect on the environment.

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Opponents cite a 2002 U.S. Geological Survey review of an earlier version of Cadiz's proposal that estimated the natural recharge rate to be between 2,000 and 10,000 acre-feet of water per year and USGS's decision to confirm their earlier findings in 2016. They also argue Cadiz's CEQA review was invalid and cite a Department of Fish and Wildlife letter to the company that said Cadiz's CEQA review didn't consider the most up-to-date information about the hydrologic connection between the aquifer and the nearby Bonanza Spring.

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t. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

As Roth and his Sacramento colleagues have attempted to pass bills subjecting the project to additional oversight, both Cadiz and its detractors have lobbied lawmakers heavily. Similar bills died in the Legislature before reaching then-Gov. Jerry Brown's desk in 2017 and 2018.

In a statement provided after the bill's signing, Cadiz CEO Scott Slater affirmed the company's commitment to moving forward with the project, despite the additional scrutiny the state has chosen to require.

"While we believe SB 307 is a troubling precedent for infrastructure development, [it will not stop the Cadiz Water Project \(/story/news/environment/2018/08/29/california-might-block-cadiz-plan-sell-mojave-desert-groundwater/1134778002/\)](/story/news/environment/2018/08/29/california-might-block-cadiz-plan-sell-mojave-desert-groundwater/1134778002/), a sustainable project designed to safely make available new water for 400,000 people in California. We stand ready to comply with SB 307, just as we have complied with all of California's stringent environmental laws."

Roth said he was pleased Newsom signed the bill, but disappointed by how much time it took to force Cadiz to submit to additional oversight.

"It's unfortunate for all parties that it took so long to get to this point. Instead of fighting tooth and nail to have the science reviewed and reconciled, if Cadiz had just sat down with the folks interested in reconciling the science, they'd probably be pumping water at some sustainable rate by now," he said.

Cadiz has claimed the project singles it out by subjecting it to additional scrutiny beyond CEQA, but Roth said it wasn't unprecedented for California to place review requirements beyond CEQA on projects proposed in fragile ecosystems, like Lake Tahoe or the California coast. SB 307, he added, contained no precedent that could force other projects to submit to additional review requirements beyond CEQA.

The project's opponents cheered at Newsom's decision to sign the bill into law.

"By signing SB 307, Governor Newsom has made clear that California will step in to defend water supply, wildlife, national parks and monuments, when the Trump administration neglects its job," Chris Clarke, California Desert Program Manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, said in a statement.

Cadiz will now have to file an application with the State Lands Commission and submit to review to reconcile the discrepancies between the various studies on the project. The company will be responsible for funding the review.

More: [California legislators halt Cadiz water project, bill heads to Gov. Newsom's desk \(/story/news/environment/2019/07/11/california-legislators-halt-cadiz-water-project-bill-heads-gov-newsom/1707644001/\)](/story/news/environment/2019/07/11/california-legislators-halt-cadiz-water-project-bill-heads-gov-newsom/1707644001/)

More: [Trump administration green-lights company's plan to pipe water from Mojave Desert to cities \(/story/news/environment/2017/10/16/cadiz-complicate-plan-water-mojave-desert/759103001/\)](/story/news/environment/2017/10/16/cadiz-complicate-plan-water-mojave-desert/759103001/)

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Previous reporting by Desert Sun reporter Janet Wilson was used in this report.

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