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Water company withdraws desalination proposal as battle over environmental justice heats up



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Amid mounting controversy and [concerns over environmental justice](#), California American Water on Wednesday withdrew its application for a desalination project in the small Monterey Bay town of Marina.

**Los Angeles Times**

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first major test of the commission's [new power to review](#) not only harm to the environment when making decisions but also harm to underrepresented communities.

At stake was the contentious future of water on the Monterey Peninsula as well as the role government should play in addressing issues of environmental inequity.



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Water demand projections, local groundwater impacts and other water supply concerns have been hotly disputed across the region, but one looming question was whether it was fair to continue burdening some coastal communities with industrial projects while others are gentrified.

The water project itself, many pointed out, would not even supply the residents of Marina. Others questioned the cost of this major infrastructure project, which could burden ratepayers with \$1 billion more over the next 30 years.

“Over the last several weeks we heard serious environmental justice concerns from residents of Marina, and cost concerns from our customers,” Catherine Stedman, a spokeswoman for Cal Am, said in a statement. “We would like to have further discussions with the residents of Marina (or City of Marina) and also spend more time explaining our proposed enhancements to our low income program for Monterey customers before seeking a vote by the Commission.”

“We are hoping to be back in front of the Commission in a few months,” Stedman said. “We still believe this is the right project in the right location, but want to build bridges to the extent possible.”

Cal Am is under a decades-old order from the State Water Resources Control Board to stop overpumping the Carmel River by December 2021. Since 1995, the company has made numerous efforts to develop an alternative supply for such a water-challenged region. (The Monterey Peninsula is isolated from state and federal aqueducts and has limited water options.)

The river, where 10,000 steelh

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The project has the support of steelhead conservationists, many groups, as well as hotels and developers in the region who for years have been unable to expand without more water. Cal Am has also met privately with some of Gov. Gavin Newsom's top officials, including Secretary for Environmental Protection Jared Blumenfeld, who says it's imperative to save the Carmel River.

Desalination opponents have urged Cal Am to instead consider a public recycled water project, [Pure Water Monterey](#), that went online this year.

Expanding that project, Coastal Commission staff recently agreed in [a 154-page report](#), would be a cheaper, more equitable and environmentally conscious way of meeting Cal Am's needs for at least the next few decades.

Jonas Minton, a former deputy director of the California Department of Water Resources who led the state's desalination task force, welcomed the news Wednesday and said it's time for everyone, including Cal Am, to work together to expand the recycling project rather than continue the back-and-forth.

"It is past time for Cal Am to realize that impacts of the proposed desal plant on disadvantaged residents, the coast and the environment can never be eliminated. These cannot be explained or negotiated away," said Minton, who is now a water policy advisor for the Planning and Conservation League. "It is time for the Pure Water Monterey water recycling project to move ahead. This will provide ample water for current and future residents and allow Cal Am to cease its illegal diversions from the Carmel River."

Marina's mayor, Bruce Delgado, called Cal Am's withdrawal a huge win for his community, which has been af

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He reflected proudly on the many members of his community standing up to Cal Am's lawyers and polished campaigns.

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"This is one of the happiest days of my life, and one of the most important days for the city," Delgado said. "It feels like we got our water and our future back."

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Rosanna Xia is an environment reporter for the Los Angeles Times. She covers the coast and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2020 for explanatory reporting.

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