

Guest commentary: Why is Cal Am still pushing for desal?

by MELODIE CHRISLOCK

Cal Am just can't take no for an answer. The Coastal Commission said no, the Peninsula said no, Marina said no. Now it asks us to believe it wants to work with us to find a solution. Really?

Cal Am continues to block the obvious solution. The expansion of Pure Water Monterey would lift the moratorium and give us plenty of water for economic recovery, long-term growth and the development of affordable housing. Decades of water restriction could be history in just 20 months. The only obstacle that stands in the way is Cal Am.

Why? It's not because the expansion can't provide enough water for affordable housing or save the Carmel River. Those are false arguments used as cover for the real reason.

As an investor-owned utility, Cal Am does not make money on water. It makes money on its capital investments. It earns a 9.2% rate of return on equity invested in projects. In its first year, this desal plant would earn it over \$9 million in profit. Over 30 years, it would earn an estimated \$123 million.

How much would Cal Am earn on the Pure Water Monterey expansion? It would earn nothing. The reason Cal Am keeps pushing to have this desal project approved is clear. Its motivation is shareholder return, not the best interests of our community.

Environmental justice made the headlines, but the fact there was an alternative project that could meet the needs of the Peninsula was critical to the Coastal Commission's pending decision.

Three public water agencies and their expert consultants have all shown that the Pure Water Monterey expansion will provide the Peninsula with plenty of water for decades. Desal is not needed. They say the expansion

has more than enough source water and can withstand a drought.

For months now, Cal Am and its supporters in agriculture and hospitality have been trying to discredit Pure Water Monterey and its expansion. It started with Cal Am asking the Monterey One Board not to certify the expansion's Environmental Impact Report and then using that lack of certification to discredit it. Cal Am worked hard to convince the Coastal Commission that the expansion was not a feasible alternative. But the Commission looked at the facts and said the expansion was the best solution.

Cal Am's influence on the Monterey One Water board is a reason the expansion's EIR has still not been certified. 700 acre-feet of desal water promised to Castroville is the key to half the votes on the Monterey One board. It's a sweet deal for Castroville, but this water would be heavily subsidized by Cal Am's Peninsula customers, raising the cost of water for the Peninsula.

What about the Carmel River? Do we need 6,000 acre-feet of desal water to protect the River and meet the State's deadline? No.

With Pure Water Monterey delivering, we can stop illegal withdrawals from the Carmel River in December 2021. After 25 years, the problem of overdrafting the Carmel River has been solved. The steelhead don't need Cal Am's desal anymore than the people on the Peninsula do.

Credit for solving this long-standing problem goes to our public agencies and our community's conservation efforts, not to Cal Am.

The Water Management District's plan is sound. Pure Water Monterey can deliver 3,500 acre-feet. With a diverse supply from Pure Water Monterey and its expansion, ASR, and our legal draw from the Carmel River, we would have plenty of water to lift the moratorium and grow.

Ironically, Cal Am is the only real obstacle to a new water supply for the Peninsula. Cal Am should sign a Water Purchase Agreement for the PWM expansion immediately.

Melodie Chrislock is the Managing Director of Public Water Now.