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Desert Water for Coastal Lawns?

Judith Lewis Mernit | Mar 21, 2012 05:00 PM

If you accept the interpretation of the Santa Margarita Water District -- Orange County, California's second-largest water supplier -- nature has been terribly wasteful with water in the desert. Take, for example, the little bit of rain that falls in the far-away Cadiz Valley, near California's border with Nevada in the Mojave Desert. About four to 10 inches of it comes down every year, mostly in the winter, but also during brief summer thunderstorms. There's snow, too, that falls in the mountains and runs down into the valleys. And while some it replenishes deep groundwater basins, nourishes plants and recharges springs, another portion of it just drains away. Or, worse -- it evaporates.

And what isn't lost to the air, says Santa Margarita's environmental study, is "lost to the brine zone." It mingles with the salty desert soil and disappears underground.

So, the proponents of a vast desert water project argue, why not capture that renegade water and put it to "beneficial use"? Use it, that is, to green the lawns of Santa Margarita's customers in suburban Southern California, or to fill swimming pools on baking Inland Empire days. That's precisely what the Santa Margarita agency, along with five other small Southern California water districts, intends to do.

"The fundamental purpose" of the Cadiz Valley Water Conservation, Recovery and Storage Project, says a draft environmental study released in December, "is to save substantial quantities of water that are presently wasted" -- water that discharges out of the upper-elevation aquifer and flows to the surface of lower-elevation dry lakes. Without the project, three million acre-feet of fresh water would go to waste over the next 100 years, says the report. That's why Cadiz, Inc., has pronounced the plan "sustainable."

Bristol Dry Lake, in the Cadiz Valley. Image courtesy Flickr user Chuck Coker.

You won't, however, find a desert conservationist who sees it that way. "We think it's a bit ironic that the word 'conservation' is the title of this project," says Seth Shteir, the California Desert representative for the National Parks Conservation Association. "'Conservation' implies saving something for future generations. What this is, really, is an aggressive scheme to mine groundwater in the Mojave Desert."

On March 13, the NPCA, in league with more than a dozen other environmental and conservation groups, lashed out against the Cadiz Project with 78 pages of official comments on the water agency's environmental study, assailing the project's flawed hydrological assessment, its potential impact on the seeps and springs that sustain obligate drinkers like bighorn sheep, and the uncertain consequences of water mining for the desert's storied deep-rooted plants. (Read the comments document here)

Their comments also call into question the very terms under which the process has gone forward: The Santa Margarita Water District, the document states, should never have led and directed the Cadiz projects' environmental study. Following the rules of the California Environmental Quality Act, the "lead agency" is one with "general governmental powers such as a city or a county." The environmental report on Cadiz should have been done by San Bernardino County, which governs the land in which the project resides.

Keith Brackpool, the British entrepreneur who founded Cadiz, Inc., the company that owns some 35,000 acres above the aquifer, knows exactly how much that lead agency business matters. The environmental impact of the Cadiz project has been evaluated by government agencies before, and it frankly didn't look so good. More than a decade back, Brackpool floated the $150 million plan to Southern California's Metropolitan Water District as a way to bank the agency's excess Colorado River water during wet years and pump out native groundwater during prolonged droughts.

That plan failed due primarily to one significant flaw: The 43-mile-long pipeline proposed to convey water from the aquifer to the Colorado Aqueduct would have crossed federal land, which meant federal agencies got to muck around in the hydrological studies. Brackpool and crew had argued that the pumping wouldn't deplete the aquifer, at least not by much. But in 2001, John Bredehoeft, then a hydrologist with the USGS, found that the company and its backers had overestimated the local rainfall and runoff by at least a factor of 10.

The next year, drought hit the Colorado, obviating the storage part of the Cadiz project. Metropolitan pulled out.

There's nothing to suggest that this version of Cadiz is any better than the first. There is, however, one significant difference: The pipeline will no longer travel across federal land; instead, Cadiz has secured a route from aquifer to the aqueduct along a private railroad right of way. Now, the only environmental law Cadiz has to comply with now is California's.

Yet even that might still be enough to do Cadiz in. Now that their official public comment period is over, Santa Margarita and Cadiz can presumably address the criticisms, move forward to a final environmental study, and seek approval from the state's environmental review board. But the environmental groups' complaint insists the Cadiz project's proponents need to start over. And they will likely go to court to make sure they do.

"Look," Shteir continues, "we've got a 3,000-page draft environmental impact report which has raised more questions than provided answers. And we don't believe the project should go anywhere until those answers are provided."

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Image of a signpost in the Cadiz Valley courtesy Flickr user Aquafornia.