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Public Citizen Demands Delay in the Approval of Multi-Million Dollar Desalination Project in Cambria

Conflict of Interest Allegations Must be Investigated

CAMBRIA, Calif.- Public Citizen today filed a complaint to urge the Fair Political Practices Commission to investigate a potential conflict of interest case involving Cambria Community Services District Board (CCSD) Member Greg Sanders. The complaint highlights the opportunity for financial gain at the expense of taxpayers through the construction of an environmentally questionable desalination facility on the California coast.

As both a member of the CCSD Board of Directors and as a partner in the law firm of Nossaman, Gunther, Knox Elliot LPP, Mr. Sanders presents a potential conflict of interest. Both he and his firm stand to benefit financially if the project agreement is approved and the desalination industry gains momentum in California. Nossoman clients that stand to benefit from the project include the water company USFilter, a subsidiary of the international French conglomerate, Veolia Environnement, as well as Poseidon Resources, a New Jersey-based consulting firm. Both companies specialize in water treatment and desalination, and are currently advocating for desalination projects along the California coast.

On April 17, the CCSD will vote to approve or reject a proposal to construct a major desalination plant as a joint project with the Army Corps of Engineers in Cambria. The anticipated production of the facility would be up to 481 acre-feet per year, enough water for almost 500 additional households in the Cambria area. This additional water supply could spur development and line the pockets of contractors and investors with an inside track while leaving the general public out to dry.

“The Army Corps of Engineers is notorious for their total disregard of the environment. Cambria residents would be wise to reject this desalination proposal and pursue sustainable water management alternatives such as conservation and reclamation,” said Juliette Beck, California coordinator of Public Citizen’s Water for All Campaign. “The necessity of the facility is questionable enough without monetary benefits clouding the judgment of elected officials.”

Local residents fear that the costly and energy-intensive desalination plant will not solve Cambria’s water problems without creating environmental and financial losses that ultimately far outweigh any water gains.

“The proposed form of desal is not an environmentally sustainable form of water production,” said long-time Cambrian and marine biologist Patrick Milburn. “It’s likely to lead to an ever-widening ‘dead’ sea as the discharge of dense, concentrated brine settles and depopulates the area, endangering our fisheries. An environmental impact report (EIR) is essential before any contract is signed for a desal project.”

The CCSD is already facing a June trial date in the CCSD vs. The Coalition to Save Cambria and San Simeon matter which alleges, in part, that there have been Brown Act violations in connection with the CCSD's process in moving towards desalination. The Brown Act governs open meetings for local government bodies.

Pam Heatherington, Director of the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo (ECOSLO) said, "We cannot lose sight as to why private industry is attempting to tap the ocean for drinking water. Waivers to the Clean Water Act abound in this state while little attention is focused on cleaning up polluted drinking water supplies left behind by industry. Our elected officials must be held accountable."

Eighteen desalination plants are now proposed along the California coast. The Huntington Beach City Council recently rejected a plant proposed by Poseidon Resources due to environmental concerns and fears that the public-private partnership would erode local control and accountability.

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Ralph Nader, Founder

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