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## WATER

# Polls show support for 2 desalination proposals

Critics say surveys on Huntington Beach, Dana Point plants are biased

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Public support for proposed desalination plants in Huntington Beach and Dana Point appears strong in two recent polls, although opponents call the surveys biased and say neither poll addresses key obstacles facing these very different projects.

One poll showed 76% support among Huntington Beach residents for the proposal there. Another said support ranged from 64% to 80% for the project proposed near Doheny State Beach, depending on how the question was framed.

"I think the survey provided some good feedback as far as the general feeling about desal is concerned," said Dennis Erdman, a board member of the South Coast Water District, which is pursuing the Doheny project. "However, as with any complex public project, the details are important.

"Public support is (just) one of those details," said Erdman, who has expressed reservations with the project.

Public opinion aside, issues with the Doheny project include the lack of commitment to partic-

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## Polls

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ipate from neighboring water districts and the financial burden if South Coast Water District pursues the project on its own.

The polls come as both proposals approach critical junctures.

Poseidon Water's \$1 billion private, for-profit plant would produce 50 million gallons a day in Huntington Beach — enough for about 450,000 residents. It goes before the Regional Water Quality Control District next week with the hope of securing one of the two final permits needed for construction.

South Coast Water District, a public agency, wants to build a \$120 million plant near Doheny State Beach that could produce up to 5 million gallons a day and uses an ocean-pumping technology preferred by environmentalists to the Poseidon proposal. In May, the district voted to study a scaled-down version, which sets the table for the district's board to decide whether to put aside the original plan.

### Different needs

Criticism of the Poseidon-commissioned polling has been broader than that for the Doheny project, in part because two major opponents of Poseidon have been largely supportive of the South Coast proposal.

In the eyes of Orange County Coastkeeper and Residents for Responsible Desalination, the Doheny proposal is superior because the technology has less environmental impact and because there is potentially more need for a new water source in South County.

Both proposals are touted as protection against future droughts, but the issue is more acute for South Coast Water District, which imports 90% of its water from Northern California and the Colorado River to serve its population of 35,000.

The Orange County Water District, which would buy the Poseidon water, imports just 23% of its water to serve a population of 2.5 million in north and central Orange County. Unlike South County water districts, the Orange County Water District has a large groundwater aquifer that supplies the majority of its water. That helps provide a buffer against drought and the threat of an earthquake disrupting imported flows.

### Poll vs. poll

Besides the differences in the projects, the polls also have key differences.

In asking residents in May whether they supported their project, the Poseidon question also mentioned "high-quality drinking water," "drought proof" and "no financial risk to taxpayers." That drew 76% support.



Desalination plants proposed for Doheny Beach, shown here in an artist's rendering, and Huntington Beach scored high with the potential customers of the water in recent polls, but critics said the questions were designed to prompt positive responses.

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The South Coast poll's first question on desalination simply asked whether the respondent had "a positive or negative impression of the concept of ocean desalination to create drinking water." That resulted in 75% positive response to the June survey question.

After a series of questions that discussed the project's attributes, support went up to 80%. That support then dropped after criticism of the project was read to respondents and possible rate increases were enumerated.

The low point of support came when it was asked whether respondents would pay \$15 more a month for desalination, the high end of current cost projections. Still, 63% supported it at that

price.

"The South Coast (survey) is more consistent with what a valid poll looks like," said Ray Heimstra of Orange County Coastkeeper. Poseidon's main question "is clearly biased," he said. He also challenged some of the assertions in the question, including the financial risk.

Scott Maloni, the Poseidon vice president overseeing the Huntington Beach project, denied that the polling, done by J. Walling Opinion Research, was intended to prompt a positive response.

"We are genuinely interested in public opinion about what we are proposing to do," he said.

### 'Ignorant' public?

But the South Coast poll also

has its critics.

"I think this is a feel-good survey asking the ignorant (respondents) questions about something they know little about and then leading them to the desired answers," said Toni Nelson, a critic of the project.

She pointed out that when asked if the majority of their water came from outside Southern California, just 45% correctly answered, "Yes."

South Coast General Manager Rick Shintaku said his district's pollster, FM3, drew up the questions on its own "to ensure that this survey would be as free as possible from any bias or skewing to a specific outcome." He also noted the inclusion of project criticism in the poll.