



Cambria Activists & Mercury Put Desal Plan in Retrograde

Another attempt to diminish CEQA in the County meets determined, successful opposition

By Lynne Harkins

In what veteran Cambria Community Service District observers have described as a significant upset (with a significant impact!), environmental community activism in Cambria has forced off the table an attempt by the Cambria CSD to exempt itself from environmental review of the Army Corps of Engineers proposal to drill multiple desalination test wells on Santa Rosa Creek State Beach.

Put forward in the guise of just a little harmless information gathering, the proposed exemption raised an alarm in the community. Environmental review is already a locally charged issue, with the Cambria CSD being sued by LandWatch SLO over alleged deficits in the District's Environmental Impact Report for the Cambria Water Master Plan, citing impacts to aquatic habitat and biota.

As the lead agency on the project, the Army Corps compiled a 17-page Coastal Act Consistency Determination, asserting that the project would comply with the Coastal Act to the "maximum extent practicable" — always a phrase that leaves room for interpretation, certainly when it

environment, including a reef that provides habitat for multiple important fish species near the proposed drilling area. He also pointed out omissions in the staff/Corps report's description of the appropriate jurisdictional/regulatory framework which applies to the nearshore environment and safeguards the recently designated Marine Protected Area off Cambria.

Elizabeth Bettenhausen's extensive analysis pointed to the Corps' and District's failures to allow for the vital functioning of the beach ecosystem itself, quoting from the book *Sand: The Never-ending Story*, by geologist Michael Welland: "Without meiofauna, the sand of our beaches and lakeshores would be stinking, toxic places, with organic debris rotting unconsumed and dangerous bacteria rampant. The microscopic creatures of the meiofauna feed off this debris: They keep our beaches clean." (More reason to, as Surfrider says, "Respect the beach!")

Tina Dickason asserted there was a failure to accurately describe public health threats that will accrue as a result of the diesel pollution and other potential contaminants that could be released by drilling activity. The Corps says the odors will disappear and there will be no problem for surrounding residences and the Shamel Park public playground, but that flies in the face of the known carcinogenic effects of diesel emissions, which was pointed out by Mary Giacoletti's letter, read into the record by Jack McCurdy. McCurdy also told the Board that the Santa Lucia



Let's see for ourselves Cambria residents mark off the proposed locations of test wells for the desal plant.

comes to dealing with Santa Rosa Creek State Beach, highly accessible to and much beloved by the Public.

The Corps and CCSD's bid for a highly-accelerated process was evident when the CCSD Board of Directors announced over New Year's weekend a Jan. 5 meeting designed to speedily commence and complete the test wells project on the beach sometime around March. At that meeting, the CCSD Board nevertheless got an impressive turnout and a resounding thumbs down on the matter. Compelling public testimony drew recurring rounds of applause from the audience as the majority of thirteen speakers made their own well-documented "negative declarations" in response to the 40-page staff report released just days before.

One speaker after another pointed to glaring sins of omission and proposed commission. Commencing with Mickie Burton's charge that the Board was misconstruing the grounds for environmental exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), there followed Jim Webb's detailing of what he saw as an egregious failure to allow for the extreme complexity of the near-shore

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Cambria

continued from page 2

Cambria CSD decided to try to put a desalination subsurface intake on the beach at the mouth of the creek.

With no comprehensive answers available, an ad hoc citizen science inquiry was initiated, entailing creek sediment sample collection and testing, which yielded findings of mercury in four creek locations, a mile or closer to the beach. Most startling was a sample that found mercury at 540 parts per billion in one location at the mouth of the creek.

The Santa Lucia Chapter stepped up to the plate and backed this citizen-reporter's investigation – both in principle and financially — in pursuing further testing to see if bioavailable and highly toxic methylmercury was part of that total mercury. The tests came back positive for 3 parts per billion methylmercury.

That doesn't sound like much until one learns how damaging minute quantities of methylmercury can be, because it biomagnifies as it moves from one organism to the next in the food chain. Methylmercury found in sediments often indicates the presence of concentrations 10 to 90 times greater in the surrounding biota, due to its high solubility and bio-availability.

In the California Ocean Plan for Water Quality Control, the Regional Water Board has rules for discharges, with water quality objectives, limiting concentrations for mercury that are expressed in fractions of a part per billion. When asked about these limits, Dominic Roques of the RWQCB said they refer to total mercury; *there are no allowable*



Outlook unclear The logic in the CCSD's desal project studies resembles a winter day on Santa Rosa Creek State Beach.

discharge levels for methylmercury.

What would be in the discharge to the ocean if test wells, and then desalination, were to be pursued in this specific location in Cambria?!

This question also looms: Is the terminus of a creek that had almost three million pounds of liquid mercury extracted from a mine just five miles upstream a good place to put an intake for creating a drinking water supply? Viewing the awesome speed and force with which winter storm water makes its way down Santa Rosa Creek to the ocean, sweeping huge quantities of sediment with it, this observer thinks not.

After the January 5 meeting, CCSD President Sanders was quoted in *The Cambrian* as saying that the district "has known about the mercury situation for years. But we need to put the data in a comprehensive form so

the public knows how it was dealt with."

One ratepayer opined that it will be interesting to see how the director most associated with desal squares that admission of prior knowledge with the requirement that district decisions be made in public meetings, based on information made known to the public in a timely manner. (President Sanders: What did you know and when did you know it?)

All of the January 5 testimony had the cumulative effect of decelerating the Board's headlong rush, especially with ratepayers urging them to take time to reflect on all the information presented in public comment.

Ultimately, after two recesses and a conference with counsel, the Cambria CSD Board decided against approving the CEQA exemption, and instead voted to direct staff to commence, per

CEQA, an initial study for the project. The further consideration of the course of the test wells project was deferred until their regular January 21 Board meeting. The Public prevailed for the day.

The CCSD has sent out a Notice of Intent to adopt a Negative Declaration for the test well drilling/installation project. Apparently abandoning their quest for CEQA exemption, the Cambria CSD seeks to press forward by still asserting, now in a Negative Declaration, that there will be no significant impacts from 7 to 10 test wells on Santa Rosa Creek State Beach, with tens of thousands of pounds of equipment lumbering over the beach, drilling and pumping from multiple wells up to 150 feet deep.

Per that study, everyone can be glad that there seems to be no problem with mercury in the SR-4 well near Santa Rosa Creek, which provides drinking water (and which could providing potential relief for concerns about a water shortage for current ratepayers). However, what's in the depths of a well does not address the problem with surface and water sediment contamination from past and present mercury mine impacts.

It seems ill advised to draw false comfort by essentially comparing apples to oranges. A fuller investigation of the mercury issue than is called for in the Negative Declaration would appear to be in the best interests of public health and safety and seems prudent before disturbing sediments that could have negative impacts on this coastal ecosystem. The precautionary principle surely applies here. (Go to the Science and Environmental Health Network website, www.sean.org — a wonderful website for the concept of guardianship and stewardship into the future.)

Our Annie

continued from page 3

point in her life in that way is the most humbling gift I have ever received.

For the rest of my days, I will always look at landscapes, seascapes and skies with Annie's eyes. I want to appreciate the world every day as a better place for her having been here.

-Sarah Christie



The Measure of Anne McMahon

There are any number of ways to take the measure of a person, but two seem to be most telling on a human scale:

Do people smile and immediately feel better when they see that person coming?

and

Does that person, through his or her everyday example, in small acts and large, when people are looking and when they're not, cause the rest of us to understand that we need to be better people?

For Anne McMahon, for our Annie, anyone who was blessed by knowing her knows what the answer is

And also knows that without her there is less, now, to smile about.

And we also know that to finish (will there ever be an end point?) what Annie was doing, the rest of us will have to be better –

kinder,
gentler,
more compassionate,
more persistent,
more understanding,

than we usually are.

- Bud Laurent