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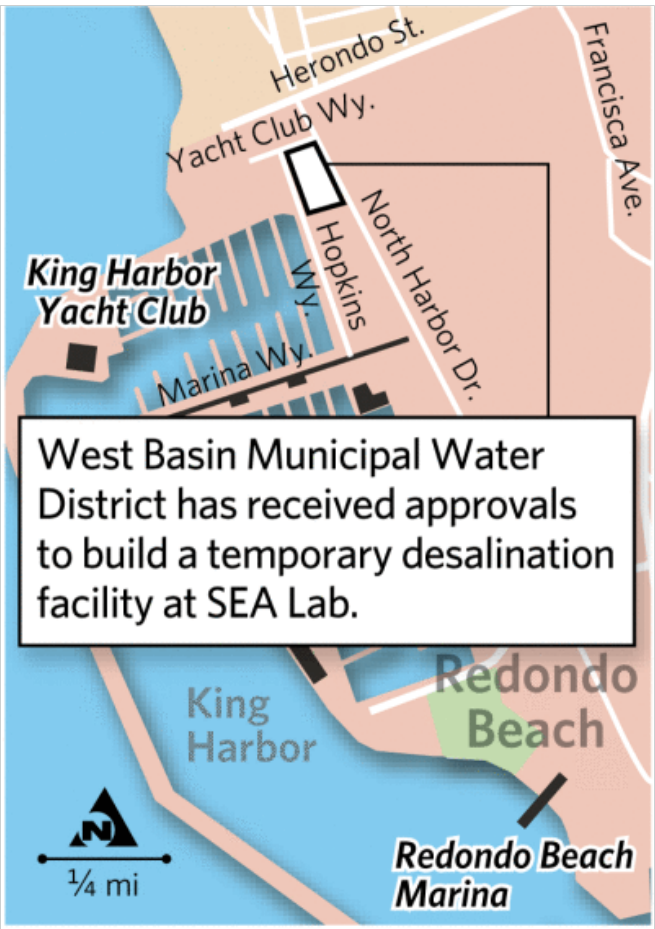
West Basin water district gets final desalination plant approval

By Melissa Pamer Staff Writer

Posted: 08/03/2009 06:59:42 PM PDT



Paul Penzella Staff Artist

A regional water agency has received the go-ahead to build a temporary facility in Redondo Beach that will turn seawater into drinking-quality water.

For Carson-based West Basin Municipal Water

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District, the demonstration desalination project is one step toward a goal of obtaining nearly a tenth of its water supplies from the Pacific Ocean.

The district last month received the final approval it needed from the Regional Water Quality Control Board. The California Coastal Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers signed off on the plant in April.

The $8.8 million project, set to be housed next to the Los Angeles Conservation Corps' SEA Lab, will filter about 580,000 gallons of water daily through an old power-plant intake pipe.

A fine mesh will seek to minimize the intake of tiny ocean organisms - a concern for environmental groups that have argued more emphasis should be placed on conservation and recycling.

Water from the demonstration will not be used for drinking. Instead, the project will be used for research, particularly on water intake technologies, district officials said.

The project is intended as a temporary precursor for a full-scale desalination plant - likely in El Segundo - that would filter 20 million gallons of seawater per day and provide 9 percent of the district's water supplies.

The goal is to reduce reliance on water imported from outside the region, district officials said.

"You can look at ocean desalination, at recycling, at conservation none of them is the silver bullet," said Paul Shoenberger, assistant general manager of West Basin, which distributes water to most of the cities in the South Bay area.

"We believe in a diverse portfolio of water. The more sources you have, the more reliable you are. And ocean desalination fits the bill."

The rising cost of imports, along with the dropping cost of desalination, have made desalting attractive to an increasing number of water agencies, Shoenberger said.

The Redondo Beach desalination project will take about a year to build and will run for at least two years, he said.

The district is currently in the process of dismantling a small pilot desalination plant that was built in El Segundo in 2002 in preparation for the upcoming demonstration plant, which will be 10 times as large.

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