# San Luis Obispo County Desalination Executable Solution and Logistics (DESAL) USBR Feasibility Study

## SUMMARY OF APRIL 2026 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS

### PURPOSE

Two community engagement sessions were held within San Luis Obispo County-–one north coast in Morro Bay (April 20, 2026) and one south county in Grover Beach (April 21, 2026) -- to share progress and gather feedback on the USBR-supported DESAL Feasibility Study (Study). These sessions were designed to move beyond general awareness and into meaningful, informed discussions. Ultimately, the sessions provided participants with the opportunity to better understand the analysis and tradeoffs, ask questions, and learn about next steps for the Feasibility Study; including what potential actions might follow the current work effort if a desalination project were to be pursued further. Approximately 75 people attended the north coast session and approximately 45 people attended the south county session.

Note that the Study is an early phase, conceptual effort to explore ocean desalination in San Luis Obispo county; it is part of the District's potentially 5-Phase, multidecadal DESAL Plan effort, being conducted in collaboration with 16 local partner agencies. The Study will be completed in September 2026, after which the District and/or partner agencies may choose to pursue any, all, or no desalination alternatives identified by the Study.

### HOW INPUT WAS GATHERED

A presentation was given on the Study goals and objectives, brief history of regional water projects, description of desalination considerations, and discussion of alternatives evaluated. Public comments were received through: written comment cards collected throughout the presentation; smaller group discussions held at three topic-focused stations; and verbal comments made at the end for any questions or comments not yet addressed. Input reflected a wide range of perspectives, including questions, comments, support, and concerns. Major themes of comments are summarized below. "Questions and Answers to Themes of Input" and DESAL webpage offer more information.

### WHAT WE HEARD – KEY THEMES

- Understanding terminology
- Regional/communities need for more water
- How water could be allocated and used
- Cost of desalination, affordability and who pays
- Relationship to growth
- Environmental impacts, especially marine/coastal habitats
- Permitting and regulatory questions
- Alternative locations and site-specific concerns
- Fairness, equity, and regional benefit
- Governance and decision-making
- Infrastructure, feasibility and logistics of the alternatives
- Timeline, urgency and future planning

## TERMINOLOGY/DEFINITIONS

### Q: What is desalination?

A: Desalination is the process of removing salt from water. There are multiple desalination technologies, however seawater/ocean desalination for potable water supplies is most commonly produced by membrane separation (reverse osmosis or "RO"). Desalinated water can serve as a new water source to meet various demand types, such as municipal supply, agricultural/landscape irrigation, groundwater replenishment, and seawater intrusion mitigation.

### Q: What is brine and how is it disposed of?

A: Brine is the salty water waste product left over after the reverse osmosis treatment of ocean water for desalination. The brine needs to be disposed of, typically through an outfall back to the ocean. Brine disposal is managed in accordance with environmental regulations and monitoring requirements to minimize potential impacts.

### Q: What is an outfall?

A: An outfall is a pipe that discharges treated water—such as brine from desalination or effluent from a wastewater treatment plant—into the ocean. An outfall is typically designed to dilute and disperse the discharged water safely. Outfalls are regulated by the Regional Water Quality Control Board to meet specific standards to protect ocean water quality.

### Q: What does "feasible" mean in this study?

A: In this context, "feasible" means whether an option is technically possible and environmentally permittable.

### Q: What is recycled water?

A: Recycled water generally refers to domestic wastewater that has been treated so that it can be used more than once, such as for irrigation or industrial uses. The terms "reclaimed water" and "recycled water" are often used interchangeably.

### Q: What is SGMA & why does that matter when looking at desalination?

A: The Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) is a California law requiring local agencies to manage groundwater sustainably over time, which may limit how much groundwater can be used in the future. Drinking water utilities rely on groundwater for approximately half of the water supplies in the region. Agricultural and rural users are

almost entirely on groundwater supplies. Therefore, limits to groundwater usage could have major impacts to water availability in the region.

**Q: What is a GSA?**
A: A Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) is a local agency responsible for managing groundwater under SGMA. GSAs are responsible for developing plans to ensure groundwater is used sustainably.

## PROCESS AND DECISION-MAKING

**Q: Who is paying for this study?**
A: The study is partially funded by a U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (USBR) WaterSMART: Water Recycling and Desalination Planning grant, with the 50% local match coming from the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District).

**Q: Has a decision already been made to build desalination?**
A: No. This study evaluates conceptual alternatives for general locations for a potential future ocean desalination facility. Advancement of any conceptual alternative(s) or future project(s) would require additional studies, many steps of local and regulatory approvals, environmental review, and public input prior to any design or construction.

**Q: How are desalination project alternatives being evaluated?**
A: The study uses a screening and evaluation process to compare multiple conceptual desalination project alternatives based on technical feasibility, ability to permit, environmental considerations and cost.

**Q: Who decides what alternative moves forward?**
A: Any future decisions would involve multiple agencies, elected bodies (and their constituents), and regulatory approvals, along with public input.

## WATER SUPPLY PORTFOLIO NEEDS

**Q: Where does our current water supply come from and do we really need more water?**
A: Water supply throughout the region comes from a variety of sources: groundwater, surface water (local reservoirs and streams), recycled water and imported water (State Water Project). The mix of different supply sources varies considerably in different parts of the County. Communities throughout the county have encountered significant water supply issues in recent decades at varying locations due to drought, lack of reliable

infrastructure, environmental/legal cutbacks and climate change. This study is one of many to investigate options to develop more resilient water supplies for the future.

**Q: Why not focus only on recycled water instead of desalination?**
A: Recycled water is an important part of the region's strategy and there are ongoing efforts to increase use of recycled water in the region. This study evaluates how desalination could complement—not replace—other water supply sources to provide a more diversified, reliable and sustainable supply for our future.

**Q: Are we required to use recycled water before desalination?**
A: State policy prioritizes optimizing existing water supplies including recycled water before pursuing desalination and maximizing other resources is expected to be evaluated and considered in planning efforts and permitting processes. This is not a strict requirement, but rather a prudent practice in maximizing investments in existing supplies in a sustainable manner.

**Q: What are the parallels of Central Coast Blue and the DESAL Plan?**
A: Central Coast Blue will be a potable water reuse project, treating effluent from the wastewater treatment plant with advanced water purification technologies to provide additional water supply. This DESAL Plan is separate and distinct from that project, however there are lessons to be learned with pursuing any major water infrastructure project on the Central Coast.

**Q: What is the status and outcomes of this DESAL study?**
The DESAL Plan is in **Phase 2: DESAL Planning Phase** which focuses on preparing a USBR Feasibility Study to evaluate and compare desalination project alternatives. By the end of this study in September 2026, the District will have developed informed insights into the feasibility of an ocean desalination project to address varying scenarios of need throughout the region.

This study will include identifying favorable desalination sites and conveyance configurations associated with project needs while considering the identified environmental and physical constraints of each project alternative. Though no final decisions will be made during this phase, these findings will support meaningful dialogue among partner communities regarding the region's long-term water supply goals and efforts to support a water-secure future.

## COST

### Q: Who pays for desalination project(s) if they move forward?

A: If project partners decide to move a project(s) forward, the partnering agencies would pay for additional investigations, design, construction and operations. Grant funding opportunities should be leveraged as much as possible.

## ENVIRONMENTAL/PERMITTING

### Q: Can desalination be permitted in this region?

A: Permitting is complex and involves multiple agencies at the local, state and federal levels. This study evaluates, at a high level, whether alternatives are likely to be permittable based on the type of criteria agencies use in their permitting review. While there is a high bar for a desalination project to get permitted, the project alternatives considered the Feasibility Study are being developed to meet known regulatory requirements and mitigation measures to increase the likelihood of being permitted.

### Q: Where are the protected marine areas and what are the constraints on desalination project siting and operations?

A: There are both State of California and Federal protections for specific marine areas that have been deemed to have special habitat, productivity and diversity. An example is the National Marine Sanctuary (NMS) Program (NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries). Marine protected areas (MPA), conservation areas and reserves are other designations to protect areas of special significance. Allowable activities in each type of protected area can vary, but in general new infrastructure in the ocean is discouraged. Project alternatives have been adjusted to avoid protected areas as much as possible to minimize impacts.

### Q: How do ocean desalination operations, especially intakes and outfalls, impact marine habitats?

A: Open intakes that were permitted and built in the past can entrain marine organisms resulting in mortality or injury. Newer subsurface intakes avoid the impacts to sensitive species because they're located underneath the sediment of the ocean floor. Outfalls can also impact marine life due to creating pockets of elevated salinity. Measures to mitigate the impact of the discharge of brine is to mix the discharge with treated wastewater (thus diluting the salinity) and to use multiport diffusers that rapidly mix the brine with seawater in a small area. These design considerations have been built into our project alternatives as laid out by the State in the 2023 Desal Siting Streamlining Report (Water Supply Strategy Implementation: Seawater Desalination Siting and Streamlining Report to Expedite Permitting).

**Q: How does local land use permitting fit into planning potential desalination projects?**
A: Local agencies that have land use authority would need to permit construction of a project. If pursued further, wherever the project(s) may ultimately be located, the local agency would review the proposed project(s) under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and check for consistency with all local regulations and requirements (in the relevant land use plan and zoning code). The local agencies would be able to approve or deny the permit for development. Depending on the exact location of the project, the local agency's action may be appealable to a higher local governing body or the California Coastal Commission.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

**Q: Why was Morro Bay included in this study given the voter approved initiative, Measure A-24, which places limitations on land uses, especially related to industrial purposes at the former power plant facility.**
A: This feasibility study focused on identifying favorable desalination sites, such as the Morro Bay area, and conveyance configurations associated with project needs while considering the identified environmental and physical constraints of each project alternative. Any further discussions about actual facility siting will require more studies, including land use considerations.

**Q: Why do some alternatives require long pipelines?**
A: Pipeline length depends on where water is produced and where it is needed to provide supplies to partner agencies. In some locations there are opportunities to connect to existing infrastructure and in other cases, lengthy new pipe alignments are needed to deliver supply to partners.

## TIMELINE

**Q: Why does this take so long?**
A: Water supply projects often take decades due to development of partner agreements and funding structures, investigative studies and planning, environmental review, permitting, and construction requirements. If any desal project alternative(s) were pursued beyond this USBR Feasibility Study, communities would likely require a minimum of 10 years or more to plan, develop, approve and construct a desalination project.

## QUESTIONS OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF THIS FEASIBILITY STUDY

**Q: What is the cost per acre-foot of desal water?**
A: Rough cost estimates are currently under development for each of the five project alternatives included in the study, but desalination is typically more expensive than many existing water sources due to energy and infrastructure requirements. The challenge facing California is that there are no new inexpensive water supplies.

**Q: How far offshore would water be taken from?**
A: This depends on the intake design and site-specific needs, which would be evaluated in more detail if a project advances. Site specific hydrogeologic investigations would be required to consider how far out the intake pipeline needs to be to not impact fresh groundwater supplies.

**Q: Who would receive the water from a desal project?**
A: Potential water users vary for each alternative, and these alternatives are examples of what could be developed. Ultimate participation in a desalination project is not determined yet and would depend on where a facility was sited, and if water could be delivered cost effectively to any specific end user. Many partnerships and agreements between agencies would need to be developed, which is not part of this current study.

**Q: If an ocean desalination project were pursued, how would the community(ities) where treatment plant(s) are sited be compensated or benefit?**
A: The financial assessment of who pays, how much, and is there financial benefit to host a site, is not part of this project phase and has not yet been completed. Assumably a host site would have the opportunity to participate in benefits including reliable water supply, creation of jobs both during construction and for operation of a new facility, and potentially local tax revenues. Any compensatory mitigation as part of a project has not been determined.