



Summary Report of Key Opinion Leaders Interviews

San Luis Obispo County Ocean Desalination

May 2025



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Overview

In March and April 2025, Katz & Associates (K&A) conducted stakeholder discussions with key opinion leaders who live and work in San Luis Obispo County. The purpose of the interviews was to gauge awareness of the region's water availability and to assess public perceptions of the possible advancement of an ocean desalination project in San Luis Obispo County.

Specifically, the objectives of the one-on-one conversations with key community opinion leaders were to determine their:

- Knowledge of the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District's (District) role in water resource management
- Knowledge of water supply projects in the region
- Perception of the region's water supply resiliency and vulnerabilities
- Opinions on a potential ocean desalination plant built and operated in San Luis Obispo County
- Preferred methods for reaching and communicating with stakeholders and community members.

Methodology

One-on-one discussions are a qualitative research method best suited for uncovering a range of attitudes, opinions and experiences that may exist in a specific population. A trained interviewer follows a questionnaire to conduct a structured yet conversational interview with participants.

Method Limitations

Like other qualitative methods, one-on-one discussions allow for detailed exploration of topics, but do not provide data that is statistically representative of a larger population. This report details trends among participants when applicable, but those trends cannot be generalized. Instead, the information obtained is descriptive and should be considered as representing a range of opinions that may exist among stakeholders. It should also be noted that opinions may not necessarily be factually accurate.

Participants

Key opinion leaders were identified through a collaborative process between representatives from San Luis Obispo County and their consultants. All interviews were scheduled by a representative from the District. The stakeholders selected for interviews represent a broad range of involvement and affiliation in the region's water supply, comprising sectors such as agriculture, energy, environment, homebuilding, tribes, local government partners and local business. 12 virtual interviews were conducted. See Appendix A for a list of those interviewed. Participants were told that their names would not be directly attributed to any of their responses. To encourage candid feedback, participants were informed that their insights would be incorporated anonymously. This report uses the pronouns "Participants," "Respondents," "Interviewees," or "They," in all cases, regardless of gender, to preserve anonymity.

Stakeholder Questionnaire

A discussion guide, comprising of 17 questions, was prepared by K&A and approved by the District (see Appendix B for the discussion guide). The guide included open-ended, unprompted questions to encourage candid responses. In some cases, follow-up questions were asked for clarification.

The one-on-one discussions were conducted virtually by Sara Katz and Brent Eidson.

Discussion Length

The average length of the one-on-one conversations was 60 minutes.



Summary of Responses

The responses below are organized by topic and generalized to summarize stakeholders' insights. This document intentionally focuses on capturing the sentiments of the respondents, as opposed to direct quotes.

1. Perception of the District's role in managing the region's water resources

Participants were asked to describe their understanding of the District's role in managing the region's water resources. Interviewees were asked to describe responsibilities they feel the District performs particularly well, and to identify areas of improvement.

Participants had limited awareness of the San Luis Obispo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, or its nuance from the County of San Luis Obispo in terms of water resources management roles in the region. Most respondents thought that the District streamlines permitting, conducts research and coordinates State Water supply with regional consumers. Some respondents feel that the District's engagement and outreach is efficient, while others feel that it can be improved. One respondent expressed that they would like the District to communicate both the positive and negative impacts of proposed projects. Another respondent expressed that they have full confidence in the District's staff but is concerned with the politics that arise with water projects.

Some respondents reported that the District can improve by actively identifying methods to diversify the region's water supply portfolio, such as recycled water projects or desalination.

2. Understanding of other projects in the County

Participants were asked to share if they have heard of any projects in San Luis Obispo County intended to increase water supply.

Most respondents cited the Central Coast Blue project as a frequently reported project in the region. Most respondents shared they heard through local news outlets about the funding challenges and competing priorities that lead to the project's eventual withdrawal. Only a couple of respondents mentioned ocean desalination as a potential future water supply.

3. Understanding of the County's water supply sources

Participants were asked to share their understanding of where they receive water from, and whether they feel residents are aware of these water sources.

Participants listed State Water, groundwater, private wells and Lopez Lake as primary water supply sources. Many respondents shared their concern about a recent court order to release water from Lopez Lake to protect endangered fish populations as a threat to the region's water supply portfolio.

Since the interviewees are stakeholders in the region's water supply, they possess a unique knowledge of these water sources. But the participants predict that most residents in the region are generally unaware of where their water comes from or the challenges associated with developing new water supplies.

4. Perception of the region's water security

Respondents were asked whether they felt that the region's current water supply is safe, reliable, drought resilient and sustainable. Respondents were also asked to share suggestions on how to expand the region's water supply.

Some respondents feel that the region's natural water supply is multifaceted and secure yet needs to be managed more efficiently. Other participants expressed the need to proactively diversify the region's water supply sources and decrease reliance on State Water through water projects like recycled water and desalination. Participants also suggested increased groundwater reliance and County-led rebates to incentivize native landscaping as ways to expand, preserve and manage water supply.

Vulnerabilities to the County's water resiliency include climate change, decreasing snowmelt, increasing population and agricultural use, particularly in the County's wine regions and depletion of groundwater aquifers. Specific cities that experience water insecurity include Paso Robles, Cambria, and areas on the North Coast.

5. Perception of a potential ocean desalination plant built in San Luis Obispo County

Respondents were asked if they were familiar with the term "ocean desalination", and to describe whether they feel it is possible to implement a facility in San Luis Obispo. Respondents were asked to share any concerns they have about the possible advancement of an ocean desalination project in the region.

All respondents were familiar with the term "ocean desalination" and did not express the need to edit the name.

Most respondents shared that they feel it is possible to build and operate an ocean desalination facility in San Luis Obispo County. Respondents opined that the County should proactively prioritize improving the region's water resiliency. Most respondents supported the continued evaluation to consider desalination as a water supply option for future consideration, but important to note that some respondents are opposed to ocean desalination as a water supply.

Questions and concerns about building and operating a desalination plant in San Luis Obispo County include:

- **Cost:** Constructing and operating an ocean desalination facility is seen as one of the more expensive sources of water supply as noted by respondents. Questions were raised about the viability of moving forward with this expensive option.
- **Energy:** Most respondents understand the energy intensive treatment process to produce desalinated water and shared their concern with not only the energy demand, but how that energy costs would be placed on the price of the desalinated water.
- **Environmental concerns** such as excess brine management and protection of coastal lands.
- **Who will own, operate and manage the plant?** How will the recipients of the produced water be determined?
- **How would the water be delivered?** If there is no existing infrastructure to deliver the water, would a pipeline need to be built?
- **Protection of cultural resources.** Understanding a new facility would likely require construction along the coast, protection of Native American Tribes' cultural resources is essential for any project that might be undertaken.

6. Perception of local media's reporting on ocean desalination

Based on their observations of the local media's reporting trends, respondents were asked to predict outlets' reporting on a potential ocean desalination plant built in the region.

Predictions of the media's reporting varied. Some respondents reported that the media would likely be in favor of ocean desalination, while others predict that the media would focus on negative environmental impacts, since many residents in the region are actively involved in environmental matters. A common perception shared by several opinion leaders suggests that the local media will not likely conduct comprehensive journalistic activities for this project, but will instead rely on the information provided by the project proponents and opponents. It is for this reason that some suggest the County make a concerted effort to engage early with the media to ensure their perspective is being shared and can be reported upon.

One respondent shared that since smaller scale projects like Central Coast Blue were paused in the past, the public may lack trust in public agencies' ability to follow through on large-scale projects like ocean desalination. Therefore, the media's reporting on desalination would likely be skeptical.

7. Most trusted sources of information

Participants were asked to share how they stay up to date with current events related to the community and the region (word of mouth, email, newspapers, newsletters, television, radio, direct mail, social media, etc.).

Many respondents stated that they believe local news publications in the region to be declining and are therefore not the most trusted place to receive their information. Some reasons stated for the perceived decline includes reductions in staffing which leads to less investigative journalism and a belief many local reporters don't have the experience or capacity to delve into the issues. Many felt that the local news will cover what is issued in a press release. We also heard that some consider there to be a partisan divide in the County that skews local reporting.

Most participants shared that they receive news from digital outlets such as email newsletters and online newspaper subscriptions. Several participants shared that they trust their local government officials either due to their personal relationships with leaders, or due to their business interests having a direct connection to local jurisdictions.

Some sources of trusted information specifically mentioned included:

- The Tribune
- New Times
- Dave Congleton, KVEC 920
- REACH
- San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce
- Cal Poly San Luis Obispo
- Elected officials

8. Receiving updates

Participants were asked to describe the method and cadence in which they would like to receive updates on the project.

Respondents shared that at least during the early stages of the study, they prefer to receive email notifications on a milestone-based frequency. Most respondents explained that over-communication can easily be drowned out by other unrelated messages that require their attention. By focusing on key steps in the process, the recipients will know that the email update contains new, relevant information that requires their attention. They prefer to receive news and updates only as frequently as necessary to ensure only relevant information is communicated.

While participants cautioned against over communicating, several also noted the importance of ongoing communications, otherwise opening up the potential for misinformation or loss of trust by the public. One respondent suggested that the District host town hall meetings for residents to receive project information and ask questions.

9. Additional Information

Stakeholders were asked if they have any additional comments to share that were not captured during the previous questions.

- a. Multiple respondents raised concerns about the region's affordability and the connection between cost of living and water supply. An unreliable water supply is a limiting factor in building more homes and developing communities. One respondent shared that community trust in the District to deliver large-scale projects is an issue. When the public doesn't see the District adequately exploring other options to expand water supply, it's hard to trust that a large-scale project like ocean desalination project will be completed.
- b. One participant shared that they would like to receive information on both the positive and negative impacts of building an ocean desalination plant conducted through a third-party research study.
- c. Although unrelated to water resiliency, many respondents shared their concerns about the region's offshore wind project. Some participants feel that the County's communication regarding the project's impacts is insufficient.





Common Themes

- Most respondents feel that ocean desalination is expensive and energy intensive but simultaneously recognize that the region needs to diversify its water supply, suggesting evaluating its feasibility has merit.
- Overall, respondents were generally supportive of the District's efforts to evaluate desalination as a viable new water supply option.
- Most respondents raised questions about ocean desalination's excess brine discharge and environmental risks.
- San Luis Obispo County is a very environmentally focused region. Many residents are active in environmental matters.
- The environmental groups interviewed stated their opposition to ocean desalination as a solution to the region's water insecurity. Due to the potential facility's brine production, energy usage and other environmental concerns including impacts from facility siting and conveyance structures, they view ocean desalination as a "last resort" water supply option compared to other projects, like recycled water.
- The District should proactively communicate significant project updates as early as possible through email notifications, public updates to the Board of Supervisors, and also briefing the other regional agencies that would potentially benefit from this new water supply in the future.

Next Steps

The input collected from the one-on-one discussions will help the District develop an effective stakeholder engagement plan to ensure proactive outreach during the feasibility study period of an ocean desalination plant in San Luis Obispo County.

Appendix

A. Organizations Represented in Interviews

The following list of organizations were represented in the key opinion leader interviews. During the interviews, the individuals representing these organizations may have provided responses that either reflected the position of their organization or were a personal response.

Organization
County of Santa Barbara
Central Coast Water Authority (CCWA)
San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau
PG&E
Surfrider Foundation
YTT Northern Chumash Tribe
Salinan Tribe
REACH
San Luis Obispo Chamber
San Luis Obispo Climate Coalition
Sierra Club
Homebuilders' Association

Appendix

B. Discussion Questions:

1. 1. In your own words, what role does the County (or Flood Control District) serve related to water resources within the region?
2. Is there anything you think the County does particularly well related to water resources and planning? Are there any areas in which you think they can improve? If so, what suggestions can you offer?
3. Before we requested time to meet with you, had you heard anything about different ways or projects being considered to increase the supply of water available in the San Luis Obispo County area? If yes, what did you hear and how or in what context did you hear about it?
4. Do you know where your water currently comes from (what are current water supply sources)? Do you think most community residents know where their water comes from to serve residents and businesses in San Luis Obispo County?
5. What is your or your organization's perception of the region's water security and resiliency? Are there specific areas that have vulnerability?
6. Do you or your organization think there is a need for more water in San Luis Obispo County, or are there specific geographic areas within the County that need more water? Why or why not?
7. Do you feel the current water supply for the region is safe, reliable, drought resilient, and sustainable? Why or why not?
8. Do you have any suggestions for where or how the region can expand its water supply?
9. Are you familiar with the term "ocean desalination"?

If so, what do you think about this type of water and how it is used?

(If No – Ocean desalinated water is used in California and other coastal states and communities. Ocean water is filtered to remove the salt through state-of-the-art processes that meet regulatory standards for both water quality and source environment protection.)

10. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear "desalination"?

Are you comfortable with this term, or is there another term or phrase you feel would be better?



11. Do you believe it is possible to implement an ocean desalination facility to help meet the water supply needs for the communities within San Luis Obispo County?

(If No – What information would you need to feel more comfortable with augmenting drinking water supplies with ocean desalinated water?)

12. What concerns, if any, would you have about the possible advancement of an ocean desalination project in San Luis Obispo County?

13. What do you think the media’s reporting would be on this topic?

14. What (or who) do you think are the most trusted sources of information for your community, especially when it comes to water resources and future investments?

15. How do you like to receive news and information about events and issues in San Luis Obispo County?

16. Would you like to be updated on the project’s progress moving forward? If so, what preferred method and cadence do you recommend?

17. Is there anything else you would like to share or add? Is there anyone or an organization that you think is important we speak with?

