

Committee on Resources

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**TESTIMONY OF BRETT R. BARBRE
PRESIDENT, MUNICIPAL WATER DISTRICT OF ORANGE COUNTY
ON BEHALF OF THE
U.S. DESALINATION COALITION**

REGARDING
H.R. 3834

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER & POWER
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
SEPTEMBER 9, 2004

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Napolitano, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Brett Barbre and I appreciate having the opportunity to testify today on H.R. 3834, the Desalination Energy Assistance Act of 2004. I am here today in my capacity as President of the Municipal Water District of Orange County, a charter member of the U.S. Desalination Coalition.

Mr. Chairman, at the outset, allow me to thank you for cosponsoring H.R. 3834. As a member of the Orange County delegation, and especially as Chairman of this Subcommittee and one of the leading experts on water issues in Congress today, your support for this important piece of legislation sends a strong signal to others of the wisdom of the approach taken in H.R. 3834 to encourage the development of seawater and brackish groundwater desalination projects. I would also like to take this opportunity to publicly thank the Chairman of the full Resources Committee, Mr. Pombo for being an original cosponsor of H.R. 3834 and for the support and interest of Congresswoman Napolitano in this legislation. Finally, I want to personally thank my Congressman, Mr. Gary Miller, for co-sponsoring this critical piece of legislation.

The Municipal Water District of Orange County serves as the wholesale supplier of imported water to more than 2.1 million people and 30 member agencies in Orange County, California. The District's charge is to provide a safe and adequate supply of high quality water to the communities, businesses, and residents that we serve.

Most experts, including the Department of the Interior, agree that large portions of the United States are facing a water supply crisis of potentially immense proportions as our population continues to grow and few new sources of water are developed. In places like California, Hawaii, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and Georgia--urban areas are struggling to meet the demands of exploding populations despite the fact that water supplies have remained the same or even decreased over the last ten to fifteen years. Water conservation and the emergence of water recycling as a tool for meeting non-potable demands have stretched available supplies further and further. But in many cases, the savings resulting from conservation and recycling do not even begin to make up for water supply losses attributable to environmental restoration programs that have forced the dedication of huge amounts of available water to environmentally sensitive areas such as California's Bay - Delta ecosystem.

It is our belief that the answer, in part, to averting future water supply crises and ensuring that clean water is available to families, farms, and businesses lies in desalinating seawater and brackish surface and groundwater and making that water available for municipal and industrial uses.

H.R. 3834 would encourage the development of environmentally sound and economically feasible desalination projects by providing energy assistance grants to qualified entities such as local water agencies and public utilities in the amount of 62 cents per thousand gallons (or \$200 per acre foot, as we say out west) for the initial ten years of a project's operation. The rationale for this approach is that while the cost of desalinating water has dropped dramatically over the last decade, the energy costs associated with desalination are still quite high. Most experts believe that these costs will continue to come down over time and that desalination will eventually be widespread. But waiting for this to occur is a luxury that, in my

opinion, we cannot afford. A modest investment to jump-start the development of these projects today is the smart thing to do.

The Federal government, quite correctly, has a long history of encouraging the development of water related infrastructure projects. Whether it was building the large dams and conveyance systems that aided in the development of the arid West, or constructing flood control projects to protect people and property in the Mississippi Delta, the Federal government has been an active participant. The same holds true with respect to potable water and wastewater treatment projects that have helped make our water safe to drink and our rivers and oceans swim able and fish able. It is equally important that our government invest in this next great technology to assure families and businesses with clean and reliable drinking water.

Throughout the United States there are a significant number of seawater and brackish water desalination projects in various stages of planning and development. In southern California, five water supply agencies, including the my own, are independently and in some cases jointly planning the development of projects that will produce nearly 200,000 acre feet of new water during the next decade while three water agencies in the San Francisco Bay region are studying the development of a 120,000 acre foot seawater desalination project.

Whether or not these projects and others like them get built in time to address the Nation's mounting water supply crises is largely dependent on whether the Federal government makes a commitment to invest in this new infrastructure as it has previously in all manner of other important water related infrastructure.

It is true that the approach suggested in H.R. 3834 to encourage the development of seawater and brackish groundwater desalination projects is different from the traditional approach of providing construction grant funds. That difference is by design. First, while the availability of energy assistance grants will encourage the development of desalination projects, these grants will be performance based. In other words, the Federal government will not be betting "on the come" that these projects will be technically and economically sound and will actually get built. Only the very best projects will get built by local sponsors and only those will receive financial support.

Equally important, H.R. 3834 will not cannibalize the other important water programs of the Bureau of Reclamation, the Corps of Engineers, or the EPA. Those programs are already under funded and none of us have a desire to adversely affect them further. The Department of Energy is the appropriate place for this program given the huge role that energy plays in the desalination process. Indeed, the Department already administers a similar program to encourage the development of renewable energy projects.

Mr. Chairman, the choice is clear. We can wait for a catastrophic water supply crisis or we can act now. The economic, social, and environmental consequences of a water supply crisis are no longer strictly local or regional concerns. This, you well know, is a national issue that demands Congress' attention. I applaud you for your leadership and commitment in this area and I look forward to working with you as you consider H.R. 3834.

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