



## Remarks to the City/County Water and Wastewater Study Oversight Committee

October 29, 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to comment this evening. The Center for Biological Diversity is a nationwide non-profit with nearly 200,000 members and online activists scattered throughout the United States and the world, with our headquarters right here in Tucson. We work through science, law, and creative media to secure a future for all species, great or small, hovering on the brink of extinction.

We share a great concern with the other groups that have presented to you from a conservation perspective: ensuring that the solutions our community pursues in securing our water future are truly sustainable. Too often lip service is paid to the concept of sustainability even while we make choices and policies that belie a reasonable definition of the term, or worse, hide unsustainable consequences in faraway places or defer them to future generations. In that respect, we commend this effort to define true sustainability for Tucson and Pima County's water future.

Unfortunately, to some members of our community "sustainability" equates to "guaranteed supply sufficient to maintain unlimited growth." This leads to a myopic focus on large scale augmentation of supply and neglect of local and regional responsibility for consumption. Rather than a hard look at the excessiveness or inefficiency of our current water use or a reasonable limit to the population our water supplies can realistically support in the desert Southwest, we are instead perpetually focused on grand and hugely expensive schemes that would allow us to avoid responsibility, such as diversion, canals, water mining, cloud seeding, desalination, and so on.

I want to take a couple of minutes to address desalination in particular in this context. While on the surface it may seem like a nifty way to tap into a vast new water supply, it comes at great cost, both economic and environmental. Depending on location and construction, a desalination plant can do serious and permanent damage to marine life and surrounding habitat in source waters. The process generates huge waste disposal problems in the form of massive amounts of brine and concentrated chemical additives. And it requires a tremendous amount of energy, which carries an entirely different set of environmental consequences.

Even a project as seemingly innocuous as the Yuma desalination plant has been fraught with problems, offering relatively small amounts of water at exorbitant cost and with unacceptable environmental consequences. Originally proposed to desalinate agricultural runoff to help satisfy Colorado River allocations to Mexico, this extremely controversial and expensive project was shut down after only nine months of operation and has been dormant for 15 years.

In those intervening years, water that was allowed to return to the Colorado River Delta has nourished and restored a small portion of the ecological health and biodiversity that once existed there, in the form of the Ciénega de Santa Clara. But water managers and state officials, eager to apply every available drop of the Colorado to the profit of humanity, consider that water to be “lost” and want to reclaim it. The truth is that the 40,000 acres of habitat created by that “lost” water are virtually all that remains of 2 million acres of lush wetlands that existed before water was diverted from the river in the first place. To organizations such as the Center that oppose this project—and certainly to the myriad species of the Ciénega that rely on that water for survival, several of which are endangered—it is in fact water that was “lost”, but has been found.

However, now that drought and continued unsustainable consumption have changed the context, pressure is building to restart the plant, despite its miserable track record and numerous legal hurdles. It seems that water managers are willing to throw good money after bad in the narrow quest to augment supply. With the threat that shortages are possible unless the plant resumes production, we are being told that we must sacrifice what little is left of one of the great jewels of the natural heritage of the Southwest, in exchange for a relatively small amount of water that may buy a little time but certainly will not solve the problem. At the same time we continue to ignore cheaper, more sensible and less damaging alternatives that are available locally, not the least of which is admitting and addressing the folly of large-scale agriculture in the desert.

In essence, schemes such as desalination allow us to ~~export~~<sup>export</sup> environmental consequences to precious places far away, out of sight and out of mind. We believe that sustainable solutions to our water problems lie not in technological boondoggles but common sense and responsibility. We think it is imperative that a committee such as this focus on local and regional approaches to achieving a truly sustainable balance between necessary consumption, realistic supply, and the needs of a healthy environment, in the hopes that we can avoid water wars and crisis in the future, and that our children will inherit a world in which the wild is still alive. Thank you.

Randy Serraglio  
Center for Biological Diversity  
(520) 396-1143  
rserraglio@biologicaldiversity.org