

Saving Desert Groundwater: The State Should Pass Senate Bill 120 to Stop Cadiz

By Peter Gleick and Mary Martin

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For years, we and others have spoken out on the desert groundwater mining project proposed by Cadiz, Inc., questioning the company's scheme to mine nonrenewable public water resources from California's Mojave Desert for short-term private profit. We've tracked this project as it has been debated in Los Angeles, Washington, and now Sacramento. Science and economics have never supported backers' claims that the project can be a sustainable part of California's water portfolio, yet this project is still alive thanks to a Trump administration all too eager to help. With a federal government unwilling to protect our natural resources, state officials need to act this week to pass Senate Bill 120, which would subject Cadiz to solid environmental review.

The Cadiz concept is simple: extract an average of 16 billion gallons per year for 50 years from a groundwater aquifer underneath protected national park and monument land for sale to Southern California for profit. The project is the very definition of "unsustainable" -- it would mine groundwater at a rate far faster than it is naturally recharged. Federal scientists at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) estimate Cadiz would remove water from the aquifer as much as 10 times faster than it fills up naturally. Without this aggressive pumping and short-term thinking, the math won't add up for Cadiz's hedge fund managers and other investors.

Scientists have also expressed concern that exploitation of the groundwater would damage rare desert springs, particularly the famous Bonanza Spring -- the largest perennial water source in the Mojave Trails National Monument. Earlier this year, [a new peer-reviewed study](#) reinforced those suspicions: the water in Bonanza Spring has the same chemical fingerprint as the Cadiz aquifer. Even a modest reduction in groundwater level could dry up the spring, which is the lifeblood of local desert birds, animals, and insects.

From a public policy and science standpoint, these impacts should have been enough to axe this proposal. Nearly 20 years ago, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California killed an earlier version of the project because of concerns about its economics, long-term viability, and environmental consequences.

What changed? Cadiz reintroduced its project and arranged for its largest potential customer, the Santa Margarita Water District, to conduct its California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review. Santa Margarita completed the review, accepting Cadiz's scientific claims and rejecting strongly conflicting science from independent agencies such as the USGS and National Park Service.

But to block skeptical federal scientists from conducting their own review as mandated by law, Cadiz aligned its water conveyance pipeline along a railroad in hopes of triggering a federal review exemption clause in obscure railroad law. This gambit was rejected by the Obama administration, but is being pursued by the Trump administration where former Cadiz attorney David Bernhardt led a Trump transition team and is now Deputy Interior Secretary.

This situation presents a choice for state officials: be complicit in this pillage-and-run scheme that lines the pockets of Cadiz investors and devastates the desert environment, or act to protect our water that sustains rare ecosystems and livelihoods. This shouldn't be a difficult choice. SB 120 would allow state agencies to conduct the necessary environmental review of the Cadiz project which the Trump administration is shirking.

California faces an important decision on Cadiz. We can repeat old mistakes and risk destroying a groundwater basin and rare desert ecosystem for private profit. Or we can choose truly sustainable water strategies like improved water conservation and efficiency, wastewater recycling and reuse, groundwater recharge, and restoration of urban streams, all of which can create far more local water and jobs than Cadiz. Proposals like Cadiz belong to a 20th century mentality of unsustainable, ecologically damaging water projects. That has no place in 21st century California water policy. California's leaders must stand up to Trump and ensure the Cadiz project doesn't harm the Mojave Desert's irreplaceable natural resources. Now that the Assembly has overwhelmingly approved the measure, we call on the California Senate to send SB 120 to the Governor's desk and for the Governor to immediately sign it.

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