

Victorian Seaside Community Irate Over Desalination Plant

With Australia suffering worsening water shortages and ever-tightening restrictions on the use of water, desalination continues to stand centre-stage in the debate about how to solve the nation's future water problems.

Major plans to construct Australia's biggest desalination plant are well under way in Victoria and, while a number of consortiums jockey to win the lucrative construction tender, the project is not without some very vocal detractors.

Announced in June, the \$A3.1 billion plant will be located on about 40 hectares of land along the Bass Coast, near Kilcunda and Wonthaggi.

Once completed the plant would supply Melbourne with 150 billion litres of clean drinking water a year. The massive project is part of the state government's \$A4.9 billion water plan. Once the desalination plant is operational, an 85 km pipeline will transport treated water to the Cardinia and Silvan Reservoirs, augmenting water supplies to Melbourne, Geelong, Westernport and South Gippsland.

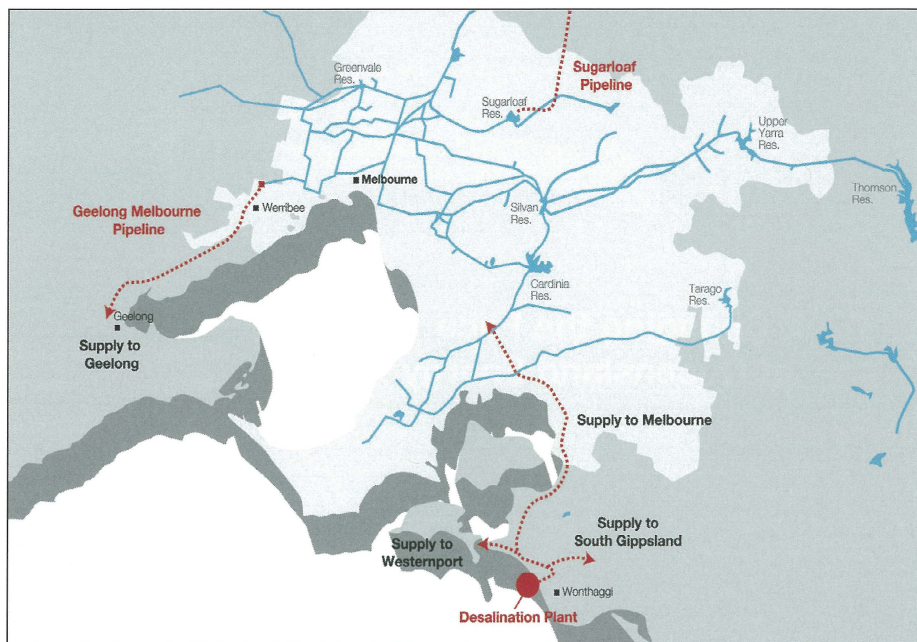
The controversial project has the support of the local council but has drawn strong opposition from local residents and environmentalists.

Bass Coast Shire Council CEO, Alan Borden, said the council should have been included in the decision to build the plant at Wonthaggi but supports the government's choice.

Environmentalists are calling on the Government to guarantee the highest level of environmental investigation into the impact a desalination plant would have on local properties.

More than 400 Wonthaggi residents recently protested against the plans, confronting the government's point-man on the project at meeting in Kilcunda. Local people are concerned the industrial plant would disrupt coastal views and damage the region's fast-growing tourism industry. Non-beachfront residents also voiced concern that overhead electricity cables and pylons to power the plant would blight the landscape over the Strzelecki Ranges and have called for power cables to be buried.

Recent flooding in the Wonthaggi area inundated large tracts of land earmarked as a buffer zone for the desalination plant.



Location of the proposed desalination plant near Wonthaggi. Residents are worried on its effect on local ocean and ranges views.

Protestors have pointed to the flooding, as well as the existence of disused underground coalmining tunnels, as a reason to move the site further inland.

make sure that we skill the people up so that those jobs can go locally", Seabourn said.

Weekend property owner, and staunch opponent of the plans, Michael Neighbour, is not convinced. He is adamant the plant should be built elsewhere. "There'll be a short-term gain in the construction phase, but once that's gone, we've got a massive plant on a 40 hectare site. You can fit 20 MCGs on the site and it's an industrial complex and it's there forever", Neighbour said.

Companies scrambling for the right to construct the desalination plant include GE Water, Veolia and Degremont. GE Water Australia said the fight for position was intense because desalination expertise was limited.

Veolia Environment, the French parent company of Connex, which runs Melbourne's train network, looks set to become a potential major player in the desalination business. The company is part of the Blue Water Consortium, which has won the contract to build Sydney's desalination plant and has formed the Coast Water Consortium with John Holland, Sinclair Knight Merz and Cardno to build a plant on the Gold Coast.

The Victorian government is expected to invite expressions of interest next year, with construction of the plant and pipeline expected to be completed in 2011. ■

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DSE spokesperson for the desalination project, Elizabeth Potter, said flooding in the area was highly unusual and neither the recent flooding nor the coalmining tunnels were reasons to consider moving the plant to another location. "There is no plan to reposition the plant a few kilometres inland. Part of the location investigations will confirm the margins of the abandoned coalmine tunnels, so that the desalination plant can be sited on ground which is entirely suitable for the construction", Potter said.

Highlighting the positives for the community, project engineer, Gary Seabourn, said hundreds of people would be employed during the building phase and about 20 people would run the plant when it is finished, also creating jobs in support industries. "There is absolutely no reason why those operator and maintainer permanent positions cannot be local people, there is a great opportunity for the local TAFE network and for industry to work together to