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## California's thirst for R&D

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**LONG BEACH, CALIF.**

In the shadows of a half-acre of gurgling pipes, flickering dials, and holding tanks, Ryan Alsop explains why America's largest sea-water desalination project of its kind is vital to California.

"We have a growing water crisis, the prospect of millions more in population, and are being forced to look long term for new options," says the Long Beach Water Department (LBWD) spokesman. One option tested here is a breakthrough method that makes the high cost of desalination more affordable.

The project represents the national interest, with potential benefits for states such as Arizona and Florida, Mr. Alsop says, citing support from the US Department of Interior's Bureau of Reclamation, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, and others. It also fulfills the intent of Congress in the Reclamation Recycling and Water Conservation Act of 1996, he says. So the \$5.25 million in federal earmarks LBWD has received since 2001 is proper and necessary, he adds.

Not so fast, counter critics. If desalination in Long Beach is so important, they ask, why is it funded in part by an anonymous add-on to a spending bill? Why isn't it part of the normal, competitive budget process?

### Effect on science

It's a query especially significant for scientists, who wonder whether research is being compromised by the proliferation of research-related earmarks.

"What is most disturbing about earmarks in research is that there is no way to determine how good that research project is ... we are often relying on the judgment of congressional staff and occasionally local officials who stand to benefit," says Ken Koizumi, director of the R&D budget and policy program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington. He says government earmarks to research have grown to record levels in recent years, and that fewer institutions are getting a larger slice of the pie - hurting competitive research.

"Most research and development budgets these days are flat or declining, while earmarks siphon off bigger portions of funds," says Mr. Koizumi. "We worry that this

trend is eating into competitive research portfolios and that scientific excellence may be weakened...."

Like the other projects profiled in this Monitor series, the desalination plant at Long Beach is cited in the "2006 Congressional Pig Book Summary," published by Citizens Against Government Waste (CAGW) in Washington. The group reports that LBWD received a \$1.25 million earmark for fiscal year 2006.

But that doesn't mean it's necessarily an example of wasteful spending. "The problem is that there is no oversight of this money," says David Williams, CAGW's vice president of policy. He says that the research at Long Beach could be "a very good idea" and that his organization does not weigh the merits of the projects it questions. But having tallied up some \$240 billion in federal earmarks since 1991, CAGW worries about a lack of proper checks and balances on that money. The practice has accelerated dangerously in recent years, he and others say.

"It's very possible that the merits of this project are not necessarily the biggest concern in the earmarking process but that reelection to Congress and what looks good in the ... member's home district are the real priority," he says.

### **A fair process?**

Others question the fairness of such appropriations. "Is there a big need in most of the rest of the country - which doesn't have the scarcity that California does - for desalinated water?" asks Scott Frisch, author of "The Politics of Pork: A Study of Congressional Appropriations Earmarks," and professor of political science at California State University Channel Islands. "Is this research that is going to be used by everyone, or is it just going to help Long Beach in their water needs?"

So long as the desalination funds are earmarked, critics say, other projects can't compete for that money. That's why the cost of earmarks exceeds its dollar value. It also involves the opportunity cost of not funding other, worthy projects that didn't have the benefit of member sponsorship.

### **Checks and balances built in**

California lawmakers who support the Long Beach testing insist that checks and balances exist to guard against corruption.

"I cannot fathom why this project was identified as a 'pork project,' " says Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein. She says the project has been peer reviewed by the American Water Works Association and others. "The [US] Bureau of Reclamation has been a partner in the project every step of the way. The federal contribution is more than matched by state and local funding. Apparently, some think that because a project is not requested by the administration, it is pork. However, the administration has been

consistently underfunding the Bureau of Reclamation's Title XVI water reuse program, so the only solution is for Congress to add funding to the project."

It's appropriate for Congress to earmark funds for specific projects because if it doesn't, the executive branch gets to decide by default, says Chris Minakowski, legislative aide to Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R) of California. Such requests, he says, must survive a vetting process several months long, including examination by the appropriations committees and subcommittees.

Earmarks, he adds, are not dreamed up for political purposes in congressional offices, but are based on requests from the home district.

"We don't seek any of this stuff out," Mr. Minakowski says. He rattles off a list of supporters from the California Resources Agency, California Coastal Commission, California Environmental Protection Agency, and others. And he puts the political motivation in a different light.

"Usually an earmark shows how popular an idea is," says Minakowski. "If they thought it was a bad idea, [members of Congress] wouldn't do it because having their name associated with it would be an embarrassment. That is the nature of democracy, rewarding the representative for doing the proper thing or voting them out if they don't."