

Cambria's Sustainable Water Facility 101—Part 1 Cambria's Long Path Toward Water Security

SUMMARY

- Cambria relies on two aquifers, San Simeon and Santa Rosa Creek, for *all* its water.
- These two aquifers are limited. They cannot alone sustain the town during extended droughts.
- Water conservation alone is not a permanent solution to our chronic water shortage. Cambria needs an adequate supplemental source of potable water.
- The CCSD spent many years evaluating proposals for supplemental water sources but these projects were found unfeasible.
- The CCSD did take two projects to the planning and development stage, only to see them killed off by political opposition. One was the construction of a reservoir off San Simeon and Van Gordon Creeks; the other was a seawater desalination plant. Both of these two projects were abruptly terminated as a result of project opponents winning elections and taking control of the CCSD Board of Directors.

Cambria's Two Limited Aquifers

Cambria is not a typical California town when it comes to water. The state has a huge and intricate web of canals, pipelines and reservoirs supplying water to tens of millions of residents. Cambria is not part of that. In terms of water, it is an island, completely dependent on local sources. *All* of its drinking water is supplied from wells in the aquifers of two streams, San Simeon Creek and Santa Rosa Creek.

Both the San Simeon Creek aquifer and the Santa Rosa Creek aquifer are relatively shallow, narrow and porous. Neither aquifer has much storage capacity and both must be recharged every year during the rainy season. There is very little water carry-over in these aquifers from year-to-year. When little or no rain occurs during prolonged dry spells Cambria's aquifers are severely stressed and the town's supply of drinking water dangerously threatened. State law and regulations further limit Cambria's right to draw on its two aquifers.

The CCSD's Historical Efforts to Solve Cambria's Water Shortages

Historically, Cambria tried to overcome the serious effects of repeated water shortages through conservation. Water conservation is necessary in Cambria as in many other parts of the world. However, it alone cannot solve the long-term problem. As Cambria learned during the exceptional drought from 2013 to 2017, drastic conservation measures requiring people to live on ever diminishing supplies of potable water are unhealthy for humans, the economy, and the environment; ultimately, extreme conservation threatens the social fabric of the community. Even then, as some California communities have sadly discovered, conservation alone may not prevent a town from running out of water altogether. Therefore, the key to solving Cambria's chronic water shortage problem is to secure an adequate supplemental source of potable water, especially during the dry season.

Over the years, the Cambria Community Services District evaluated many supplemental water supply projects including, among others, the following: a pipeline connecting **Lake Nacimiento Reservoir** to the San Simeon Creek aquifer. This project was rejected because the pipeline would have been too costly to construct and operate and it would have traversed through several environmentally sensitive areas.

The CCSD also considered an arrangement by which water would be exchanged between Lake Nacimiento and **Whale Rock Reservoir** and available to Cambria from Whale Rock. This agreement was deemed impracticable because it involved complex negotiations and agreement among interested agencies including the City and County of San Luis Obispo and the California Department of Water Resources. Another alternative solution involved extracting water during the winter from Santa Rosa Creek and pumping in into **deep hard rock aquifers** on the Fiscalini Ranch to be stored and then extracted and treated for the town's use during the dry summer months. This project was deemed less desirable because it involved obtaining rights from a third party and because the capacity of the deep hard rock aquifer was uncertain. Although these projects were not constructed, they added considerably to the CCSD's knowledge base concerning how to solve the chronic water shortage problem.

The CCSD embarked on two other projects which were feasible and which bear discussion because they have particular application to the political climate that currently threatens the Sustainable Water Facility. The CCSD entered into a **1987 reservoir sharing agreement** with a rancher on San Simeon and Van Gordon Creeks to share the cost to construct a reservoir and share the stored water. The project was abruptly halted, however, when opponents elected a majority of the directors on the CCSD Board and the Board majority terminated the agreement.

The second project that is particularly relevant to today's political climate was a **seawater desalination facility** in the 1990s that came very close to being built. The facility had

been fully designed and permitted, including all necessary permits from the California Coastal Commission. The ocean intake and discharge lines had been completed and the desal facility itself was going out for bids. Then, in the 1996 election, three project opponents beat three project supporters on the CCSD Board. Having seized control of the Board, the opponents fired the CCSD General Manager and terminated the desal project.

The political atmosphere that scuttled the 1987 reservoir project and the 1996 desal project exists in Cambria today. Project opponents want to seize control of the CCSD Board in November's general election and stop future operation of the SWF. Hopefully, what has changed is an informed majority in town that will back the project at the polls and elect candidates who support the SWF.

Conclusion

Thankfully, the story did not end when opponents canceled the desal plant in 1996. The CCSD Board eventually changed and new Boards picked up the effort to solve Cambria's chronic water shortages, culminating with the Sustainable Water Facility in 2014. The next essay in our series, titled *Inside the Sustainable Water Facility*, discusses the engineering, design, operation and capability of the SWF.

Cambrians for Water Steering Committee