Brooke T. Paup, *Chairwoman*Bobby Janecka, *Commissioner*Catarina R. Gonzales, *Commissioner*Kelly Keel, *Executive Director*



Garrett T. Arthur, Public Interest Counsel

TEXAS COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Protecting Texas by Reducing and Preventing Pollution

February 14, 2025

Laurie Gharis, Chief Clerk Texas Commission on Environmental Quality Office of the Chief Clerk (MC-105) P.O. Box 13087 Austin, Texas 78711-3087

RE: IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION BY THE CITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI FOR TPDES PERMIT NO. WQ0005289000 TCEQ DOCKET NO. 2025-0114-IWD

Dear Ms. Gharis:

Enclosed for filing is the Office of Public Interest Counsel's Response to Requests for Hearing and Requests for Reconsideration in the above-entitled matter.

Sincerely,

Sheldon P. Wayne, Attorney

Assistant Public Interest Counsel

Jessin M. Anderson

Jessica M. Anderson, Attorney Assistant Public Interest Counsel

cc: Mailing List

DOCKET NO. 2025-0114-IWD

APPLICATION BY	§	BEFORE THE
CITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI	§	TEXAS COMMISSION ON
FOR TPDES PERMIT	§	ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
NO. WQ0005289000	§	•

OFFICE OF PUBLIC INTEREST COUNSEL'S RESPONSE TO REQUESTS FOR HEARING AND REQUESTS FOR RECONSIDERATION

To the Members of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality:

The Office of Public Interest Counsel (OPIC) at the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) files this Response to Requests for Hearing and Requests for Reconsideration on the application in the above-captioned matter and respectfully submits the following.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Summary of Position

Before the Commission is an application by the City of Corpus Christi (the City or Applicant) for new Texas Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (TPDES) permit no. WQ0005289000. The Commission received timely hearing requests and requests for reconsideration from numerous groups and individuals. For the reasons stated herein, OPIC respectfully recommends that the Commission find that Hillcrest Residents Association (HRA), Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla, Daniel Peña, and Jason Hale are affected persons, grant their hearing requests, and refer this application for a 180-day hearing at the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH) on Issue nos. 1-8 contained in §III.B. Additionally, OPIC recommends denial of all requests for reconsideration.

B. Description of Application and Facility

The City applied to the TCEQ for a new TPDES permit to authorize the discharge of water treatment waste at a daily average flow not to exceed 34,300,000 gallons per day (gpd) for the initial phase and 51,5000,000 gpd for the final phase via Outfall 001. Corpus Christi proposes to operate the Inner Harbor Desalination Plant, a seawater desalination facility. If built, the facility will be located at the intersection of Nueces Bay Boulevard and West Broadway Street, in the City of Corpus Christi, Nueces County.

The proposed desalination facility process will consist of taking raw seawater and producing potable water. The wastestreams will be generated by pretreatment, membrane filtration, and desalination processes. The wastestreams from these processes will be comingled for discharge through Outfall 001. The initial phase of potable water production is 20 million gallons per day (mgd) with the final phase increased to 30 mgd. The draft permit does not authorize the discharge of domestic wastewater; it requires that all domestic wastewater be disposed of in an approved manner.

If the draft permit is issued, the treated effluent will be discharged directly to Corpus Christi Inner Harbor (Inner Harbor or Segment 2484) in Segment No. 2484 of the Bays and Estuaries. The designated uses for Segment No. 2484 are non-contact recreation and intermediate aquatic life use.

C. Procedural Background

The application was received on January 22, 2020, and declared administratively complete on May 22, 2020. The Notice of Receipt and Intent to

Obtain a Water Quality Permit was published in English in the *Corpus Christi Caller Times* on May 31, 2020, and in Spanish in *El Tejano* on June 12, 2020. The Notice of Application and Preliminary Decision was published in English in the *Corpus Christi Caller Times* on May 15, 2024, and in Spanish in *El Tejano* on May 15, 2024. A public meeting was scheduled, and the Notice of Public Meeting was published in English in the *Corpus Christi Caller Times* on March 15, 2024, and in Spanish in *El Tejano* on March 15, 2024. A public meeting was held on April 18, 2024, at the American Bank Convention Center, 1901 North Shoreline Boulevard in Corpus Christi. The public comment period ended at the close of the public meeting on April 18, 2024. The Executive Director's (ED) Response to Comments (RTC) was mailed on December 19, 2024. The deadline for filing requests for a contested case hearing and requests for reconsideration of the ED's decision was January 21, 2025.

II. APPLICABLE LAW

A. Hearing Requests

The Application was filed after September 1, 2015, and is therefore subject to the procedural rules adopted pursuant to Senate Bill 709. Tex. S.B. 709, 84th Leg., R.S. (2015). Under 30 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) § 55.201(c), a hearing request by an affected person must be in writing, must be timely filed, may not be based on an issue raised solely in a public comment which has been withdrawn, and, for applications filed on or after September 1, 2015, must be based only on the affected person's timely comments.

Section 55.201(d) states that a hearing request must substantially comply with the following:

- (1) give the name, address, daytime telephone number, and, where possible, fax number of the person who files the request;
- (2) identify the requestor's personal justiciable interest affected by the application, including a brief, but specific, written statement explaining in plain language the requestor's location and distance relative to the proposed facility or activity that is the subject of the application and how and why the requestor believes he or she will be adversely affected by the proposed facility or activity in a manner not common to members of the general public;
- (3) request a contested case hearing;
- (4) list all relevant and material disputed issues of fact that were raised by the requestor during the public comment period and that are the basis of the hearing request. To facilitate the Commission's determination of the number and scope of issues to be referred to hearing, the requestor should, to the extent possible, specify any of the ED's responses to the requestor's comments that the requestor disputes, the factual basis of the dispute, and list any disputed issues of law; and
- (5) provide any other information specified in the public notice of application.

30 TAC § 55.20(d).

Under 30 TAC § 55.203(a), an "affected person" is one who has a personal justiciable interest related to a legal right, duty, privilege, power, or economic interest affected by the application. An interest common to members of the general public does not qualify as a personal justiciable interest. Relevant factors to be considered in determining whether a person is affected include:

- (1) whether the interest claimed is one protected by the law under which the application will be considered;
- (2) distance restrictions or other limitations imposed by law on the affected interest;

- (3) whether a reasonable relationship exists between the interest claimed and the activity regulated;
- (4) likely impact of the regulated activity on the health and safety of the person, and on the use of property of the person;
- (5) likely impact of the regulated activity on use of the impacted natural resource by the person;
- (6) for a hearing request on an application filed on or after September 1, 2015, whether the requestor timely submitted comments on the application that were not withdrawn; and
- (7) for governmental entities, their statutory authority over or interest in the issues relevant to the application.

30 TAC § 55.203(c).

Under § 55.203(d), to determine whether a person is an affected person for the purpose of granting a hearing request for an application filed on or after September 1, 2015, the Commission may also consider the following:

- (1) the merits of the underlying application and supporting documentation in the administrative record, including whether the application meets the requirements for permit issuance;
- (2) the analysis and opinions of the executive director; and
- (3) any other expert reports, affidavits, opinions, or data submitted by the executive director, the applicant, or hearing requestor.

30 TAC § 55.203(d).

For applications filed on or after September 1, 2015, § 55.205(b) states that a hearing request by a group or association may not be granted unless all of the following requirements are met:

(1) comments on the application are timely submitted by the group or association;

- (2) the request identifies, by name and physical address, one or more members of the group or association that would otherwise have standing to request a hearing in their own right;
- (3) the interests the group or association seeks to protect are germane to the organization's purpose; and
- (4) neither the claim asserted nor the relief requested requires the participation of the individual members in the case.

Under 30 TAC § 55.211(c)(2)(A)(ii), for an application filed on or after September 1, 2015, the Commission must grant a hearing request made by an affected person if the request raises disputed issues of fact that were raised by the affected person during the comment period, that were not withdrawn by filing a withdrawal letter with the Chief Clerk prior to the filing of the ED's RTC, and that are relevant and material to the Commission's decision on the application.

Under § 55.211(c)(2)(B)–(D), the hearing request, to be granted, must also be timely filed with the Chief Clerk, pursuant to a right to hearing authorized by law, and comply with the requirements of § 55.201.

B. Requests for Reconsideration

Any person may file a request for reconsideration of the ED's decision under 30 TAC § 55.201(e). The request must be in writing and filed with the Chief Clerk no later than 30 days after the Chief Clerk mails the ED's decision and RTC. The request must expressly state that the person is requesting reconsideration of the ED's decision and give reasons why the decision should be reconsidered.

III. ANALYSIS OF HEARING REQUESTS

A. Whether the requestor is an affected person

Requests by Groups/Associations

Hillcrest Residents Association

The Hillcrest Residents Association submitted a timely request for contested case hearing. The request raises concerns that were previously raised by HRA in timely comment, including concerns related to increased salinity, the ED's antidegradation review, modeling conducted in support of the draft permit, and adverse impact to aquatic life, terrestrial life, human health, and use and enjoyment of property. HRA also urges the ED to re-open the public comment period to allow the public to evaluate and comment on new information that was not previously available, including the addition of whole effluent toxicity (WET) testing and biomonitoring requirements to the draft permit, and modeling files that were not provided by the Applicant. HRA includes within its request a list of disputed issues it contends are appropriate for referral to SOAH for resolution. These timely comments satisfy 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(1), the first requirement for group standing.

HRA explains that it "was formed for the purpose of protecting public health, safety, the environment, and the quality of life for residents in the Hillcrest neighborhood and the immediately surrounding area..." As such, OPIC finds that the interests HRA seeks to protect are germane to the organization's purpose as required by 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(3). Additionally, OPIC finds that

neither the claim asserted, nor the relief requested, requires the participation of individual group members as required by 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(4).

To be considered affected, a group or association must also identify a member who would otherwise have standing to request a hearing in their own right. *See* 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(2). To establish standing, the group must show that at least one of its members possesses a personal justiciable interest in this matter related to a legal right, duty, privilege, power, or economic interest affected by the application. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(a). Furthermore, the interest must be distinguished from interests common to the general public. *Id.* The request identifies multiple group members as having standing to request a hearing in their own right. OPIC finds that HRA has satisfied this requirement for establishing group standing and highlights a few of HRA's identified members below that support associational standing.

First, Norman Johnson explains that he owns multiple properties near the proposed Facility. According to the map created by the ED's staff, the property Mr. Johnson identified by address is located approximately 0.41 miles from the proposed Facility. Mr. Johnson fears that his use and enjoyment of his properties will be affected by the proposed Facility. The request also identifies Tommy Joe Rodgers, who according to the ED's map, is located approximately 0.50 miles from the proposed Facility. Mr. Rodgers has concerns about his health related to the Facility's use of trucks to haul sludge. Mr. Rodgers also fishes for Red Drum downstream from the discharge near Whataburger Field at least once per week, and eats what he catches. He worries that the discharge will reduce fish and other

marine life, preventing him from fishing in the future. Additionally, the request identifies Renior Knox, Sr., who, according to the ED's map, is located approximately 0.36 miles from the proposed Facility. Mr. Knox explains that he gardens, runs, or walks daily in the Hillcrest neighborhood. He has concerns that the Facility's operations, including its truck traffic, will affect his recreational activities and everyday life. Mr. Knox also fishes two to three times a month, either in the canal less than one mile from the discharge point, or by boat near the Art Museum of South Texas. He is concerned that fish and marine life will be impacted by increased salinity attributable to the Facility's discharge. Also identified is Carrie Meyer, who according to the ED's map, is located approximately 2.62 miles from the proposed Facility. Mrs. Meyer and her family recreate in the waters near North Beach and the USS Lexington at least twice per week. She also operates a kayak rental and tour guide business. Mrs. Meyer has concerns that impacts to fish and the bay's health could harm her both economically and recreationally. Finally, OPIC notes that HRA also identified Madelyn Chapman (0.47 miles), Daniel Peña (0.53 miles), Wendell Williams (0.56 miles), Monna Lytle (0.61 miles), and Reverend Henry Williams (0.48 miles) as members who would otherwise have standing to request a hearing in their own right.

OPIC finds that for the identified group members discussed above, HRA has sufficiently distinguished their interests from those of the general public as required by 30 TAC § 55.203(a). The request identifies multiple group members' regular participation in recreational activities that take place in close proximity

to, and may reasonably be affected by, the discharge sought to be authorized by this draft permit. Because their activities could be impacted by the discharge, a reasonable relationship exists between the members' identified recreational interests and the regulated activity at issue here. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(3). It is also likely that the regulated activity will have an impact on the use of the impacted natural resource by the person. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(5). OPIC finds that these interests are sufficient to confer a finding of affectedness. Therefore, OPIC concludes that HRA has met all requirements for group standing and qualifies as an affected person.

Texas Campaign for the Environment

Robin Schneider and Chloe Torres submitted timely comments and a hearing request on behalf of Texas Campaign for the Environment (TCE). TCE's timely comments satisfy the first prong of the group standing requirements rule. *See* 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(1). TCE is a non-profit membership organization dedicated to informing and mobilizing Texans to protect their health, communities, and the environment. TCE promotes enforcement of anti-pollution laws designed to stop or clean up air, water, and waste pollution. Additionally, TCE is operating in opposition to the build out of petrochemical facilities that have localized impacts as well as global climate repercussions. For these reasons, OPIC finds that TCE's stated purposes are germane to the interests they seek to protect, as required by 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(3). Their hearing request raised concerns about site selection, nuisance conditions, environmental impacts,

application accuracy and adequacy, water quality and salinity, cumulative impacts, modeling adequacy, and antidegradation review.

In order for an association's hearing request to be granted, the request must identify one or more members, by name and physical address, that would otherwise have standing in their own right. 30 TAC § 55.205(b)(2). Here, Ms. Lamont Taylor has been identified as a member of TCE. According to the map created by ED staff, Ms. Taylor resides 2.23 miles from the proposed facility. Ms. Taylor has lived in the Hillcrest neighborhood for over sixty years. Presently she owns property and attends church in Hillcrest. While TCE identified justiciable concerns, and there is no distance restriction imposed by law, Ms. Taylor's residence is more than two miles from the proposed facility. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(2). Given Ms. Taylor's lack of proximity to the proposed facility, OPIC cannot find that she would be affected in a manner not common to the general public.

While TCE's purposes are germane to the interests they seek to protect, and they successfully articulated some justiciable concerns, they failed to identify a member who would otherwise have standing in their own right, given Ms. Taylor's lack of proximity to the proposed facility. Because TCE has not offered a member of the association who would have standing in their own right, the group cannot qualify as an affected person under 30 TAC § 55.205(b).

<u>Requestors Who Reside Within One Mile of the Regulated Activity and Possess a Personal Justiciable Interest</u>

Bruce Switalla

The Commission received timely comments and a hearing request from Bruce Switalla, whose property is, according to the map created by ED staff, 0.49 miles from the proposed facility. He is concerned about air pollution, nuisance odors, human health and the environment, noise pollution, and traffic. Some of these interests are protected by the law under which this application will be considered. See 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(1). Because of Mr. Switalla's proximity to the proposed facility, a reasonable relationship exists between the interests he seeks to protect and the Applicant's regulated activity—a relevant factor under 30 TAC § 55.201(c)(3). Further, the requestor's proximity increases the likelihood that the regulated activity will impact their health, safety, use of property, and use of the impacted natural resource. See 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(4)-(5). Given his justiciable concerns and proximity, OPIC finds that Mr. Switalla has demonstrated that he would be affected in a way not common to members of the general public as required by 30 TAC § 55.203(a). Therefore, OPIC recommends that the Commission find that Bruce Switalla is an affected person.

Dale Switalla

The Commission received timely comments and a hearing request from Dale Switalla, whose property is, according to the map created by ED staff, 0.49 miles from the proposed facility. He is concerned about water quality, nuisance odors, air pollution, wildlife, noise pollution, impacts to local infrastructure, and the potential negative effects the facility could have on tourism and its related

economic opportunities. Some of these interests are protected by the law under which this application will be considered. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(1). Because of Mr. Switalla's proximity to the proposed facility, a reasonable relationship exists between the interests he seeks to protect and the Applicant's regulated activity—a relevant factor under 30 TAC § 55.201(c)(3). Further, the requestor's proximity increases the likelihood that the regulated activity will impact their health, safety, use of property, and use of the impacted natural resource. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(4)-(5). Given his justiciable concerns and proximity, OPIC finds that Mr. Switalla has demonstrated that he would be affected in a way not common to members of the general public as required by 30 TAC § 55.203(a). Therefore, OPIC recommends that the Commission find that Dale Switalla is an affected person.

Daniel Peña

The Commission received timely comments and a hearing request from Daniel Peña, whose property is, according to the map created by ED staff, 0.53 miles from the proposed facility. He is concerned about water quality and the environment, as well as infrastructure. His concerns about water quality and the environment are protected by the law under which this application will be considered. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(1). Because of Mr. Peña's proximity to the proposed facility, a reasonable relationship exists between the interests he seeks to protect and the Applicant's regulated activity—a relevant factor under 30 TAC § 55.201(c)(3). Further, the requestor's proximity increases the likelihood that the regulated activity will impact their health, safety, use of property, and use of the

impacted natural resource. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(4)-(5). Given his justiciable concerns and proximity, OPIC finds that Mr. Peña has demonstrated that he would be affected in a way not common to members of the general public as required by 30 TAC § 55.203(a). Therefore, OPIC recommends that the Commission find that Daniel Peña is an affected person.

<u>Additional Requestors Who Possess a Personal Justiciable Interest</u> Based on Recreational Interests

Jason Hale

The Commission received timely comments and a hearing request from Jason Hale. In his timely hearing request, Mr. Hale raises many concerns, including those regarding impacts to water quality and aquatic life, and resultant impacts to his recreational activities. Mr. Hale previously raised these concerns in timely comment. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(6). According to the map created by ED staff, Mr. Hale resides 5.72 miles from the proposed Facility. OPIC finds that the intervening distance between Mr. Hale's property and the regulated activity is too great to establish a reasonable relationship based on his property interests. *See* 30 TAC § 55. 203(c)(3). However, Mr. Hale also claims a recreational interest that could, potentially, support a determination of affectedness.

Specifically, Mr. Hale avers that he watches and photographs area wildlife, including birds at different locations near the discharge point, such as by the Art Museum of South Texas and the USS Lexington. He believes that his recreational activity will be negatively affected by the proposed discharge because it will reduce aquatic life that serve as food sources for nearby birds, which will, in turn,

reduce bird turnout. He takes specific issue with a number of responses from the ED's RTC concerning the impact on aquatic life, salinity modeling, salinity gradients, and the ED's antidegradation review.

The Art Museum and the USS Lexington are not depicted on the ED's map; however, they appear to be located between 1.5 and 2 miles from the point of discharge. A relevant factor in evaluating if a person is affected is whether a reasonable relationship exists between the interest claimed and the activity regulated. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(3). At this distance, it is reasonable to assume that wildlife, including birds and their sources of food, may be affected by the regulated activity, and that this will affect Mr. Hale's interest in observing wildlife. Relatedly, his use of the receiving waters for the recreational activity of observing wildlife is likely to be impacted by operation of the proposed Facility. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(5). Finally, Mr. Hale's concerns about wildlife, salinity, and the antidegradation review are protected by the law under which this application will be considered. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(c)(1).

OPIC finds that Mr. Hale's explanation of his recreational activity of observing wildlife, taken in combination with the specific locations he identifies where he engages in this recreational activity, sufficiently distinguishes his interest from that of the general public. It is clear that Mr. Hale takes part in this activity, and his request intimates that he does with regularity. Therefore, OPIC concludes that Jason Hale possesses a personal justiciable interest in this matter that is not common to the general public and has successfully demonstrated that he qualifies as an affected person. *See* 30 TAC § 55.203(a).

Requestors Who Did Not Demonstrate That They Possess a Personal Justiciable Interest

The following requestors' hearing requests did not demonstrate that they possess a personal justiciable interest in the application: Iomana Al-Abed (17.84) miles), Isabel Araiza (7.24 miles), Howard Bishop (3.91 miles), Charles Boone (12.14 miles), Shelley Bryan (27.08 miles), Barbara Canales (6.66 miles), Elida Castillo (11.63 miles), Jalen Evans (4.20 miles), Laramie Fain (3.32 miles), Merida Forrest (9.79 miles), Guillermo Gallegos (9.79 miles), McKenzie Hahn (5.72 miles), Autumn Hensiek (3.32 miles), Marvin Johnson (0.41 miles), Jestine Knox, Monna Lytle (0.61 miles), Matt Manning (1.67 miles), Carrie Meyer (2.62 miles), Pamela Meyer (19.65 miles), Ana Yvett O'Reilly (9.82 miles), Maggie Peacock (9.67 miles), Dorothy Peña (9.22 miles), Conor Rice (6.29 miles), Julie Travis Rogers (2.09 miles), Ester Santee (8.44 miles), Encarnacion Serna (8.30 miles), Errol Summerlin (7.34 miles), Taylor Thorpe (9.67 miles), and Alberto Zertuche (4.82 miles). OPIC concludes these requestors did not establish that they possess a personal justiciable interest in this matter for one or more of the following reasons: (1) lack of proximity necessary to establish a personal justiciable interest; (2) failure to provide a property address or other description of the requestor's location and distance relative to the proposed Facility; (3) failure to show a recreational or economic interest distinct from interests of the general public; (4) failure to

¹ Jestine Knox failed to submit a timely hearing request; therefore, her location was not depicted on the ED's map.

provide a public comment before the close of the comment period;² (5) failure to submit a timely hearing request;³ or (6) failure to otherwise articulate with reasonable specificity the way that they will be impacted personally that is distinct from the general public. Therefore, OPIC finds that none of these requestors qualify as affected persons.

B. Which issues raised in the hearing requests are disputed

The affected requestors raised the following disputed issues:

1. Whether public notice was sufficient.

Raised by: HRA.

2. Whether the representations contained in the application, and the application itself, are complete and accurate.

Raised by: HRA, Jason Hale.

3. Whether the Executive Director's antidegradation review was accurate.

Raised by: HRA, Jason Hale.

4. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective of water quality, including compliance with the Texas Surface Water Quality Standards.

Raised by: HRA, Jason Hale, Dale Switalla, Daniel Peña.

5. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective of the environment, human health, and animal life, including both terrestrial and aquatic life.

Raised by: HRA, Jason Hale, Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla, Daniel Peña.

Office of Public Interest Counsel's Response to Requests for Hearing and Requests for Reconsideration

² The Commission is precluded by rule from finding a requestor to be an affected person if their hearing request is not based on disputed issues of fact that were raised in that person's timely comments. *See* 30 TAC §§ 55.201(d)(4)(B) and 55.211(c)(2)(A)(ii).

³ The Commission is precluded by rule from finding a requestor to be an affected person if their hearing request is not timely. *See* 30 TAC §§ 55.201(g)(1) and 55.211(c)(2)(B).

6. Whether the draft permit has sufficiently definite terms and conditions to ensure compliance with all applicable standards and regulations, including adequate monitoring and reporting requirements.

Raised by: HRA, Jason Hale.

7. Whether the modeling used to support the draft permit complies with applicable regulations to ensure the draft permit is protective of water quality, including utilizing accurate inputs.

Raised by: HRA, Jason Hale.

8. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective against nuisance odors.

Raised by: Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla.

9. Whether the draft permit is protective of the requestors' use and enjoyment of property.

Raised by: HRA.

10. Whether the draft permit will violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act by exacerbating environmental equity and public health problems.

Raised by: HRA.

11. Whether all pollutants and constituents that will be treated or discharged by the Applicant have been properly identified, quantified, and addressed in the application and draft permit.

Raised by: HRA.

12. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective against air pollution.

Raised by: Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla.

13. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective against noise pollution.

Raised by: Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla.

14. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective of existing infrastructure and against increased traffic.

Raised by: Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla, Daniel Peña.

15. Whether the draft permit is adequately protective of existing tourism businesses.

Raised by: Dale Switalla.

C. Whether the dispute involves questions of fact or of law

If the Commission considers an issue to be one of fact, rather than one of law or policy, it is appropriate for referral to hearing if it meets all other applicable requirements. The issues raised here are issues of fact or mixed questions of fact and law.

D. Whether the issues were raised during the public comment period

Issue nos. 1-15 in Section III.B. were specifically raised by affected requestors during the public comment period.

E. Whether the hearing requests are based on issues raised solely in a withdrawn public comment

No public comments were withdrawn in this matter. Therefore, the hearing requests are not based on issues raised in withdrawn public comments.

F. Whether the issues are relevant and material to the decision on the application

The hearing requests raised issues that are relevant and material to the Commission's decision under the requirements of 30 TAC §§ 55.201(d)(4)(B) and 55.211(c)(2)(A)(ii) as well as issues that are not relevant and material. To refer an issue to the State Office of Administrative Hearings (SOAH), the Commission must find that the issue is relevant and material to the Commission's decision to issue or deny the permit. Relevant and material issues are those governed by the substantive law under which the permit is to be issued. *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 248-51 (1986).

Public Notice

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that because certain materials associated with the application were not available to the public during the public comment period, the public notice given by Applicant was deficient, and consequently, the public comment period should be re-opened. The Applicant is required by 30 TAC Chapter 39, Subchapter J to provide public notice of the application. The issue of whether this permit was properly noticed is therefore relevant and material to the Commission's decision to issue or deny this permit, and Issue no. 1 is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

Completeness and Accuracy of the Application

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that the application is incomplete, is missing information, and contains inaccurate information. TCEQ rules require that if an applicant becomes aware that it did not submit required facts or submitted incorrect information in a permit application, the applicant is required to promptly submit the needed facts and information. 30 TAC § 305.125(19). Therefore, Issue no. 2 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

Antidegradation Review

Affected persons are concerned that a complete and sufficient antidegradation review was not performed. Antidegradation reviews are governed by 30 TAC § 307.5, which establishes the Commission's antidegradation policy and contains provisions for implementation of the policy.

Therefore, Issue no. 3 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision to issue or deny this permit and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

<u>Water Quality, Human Health and Safety, Aquatic Life, Wildlife, and Recreational Activities</u>

Affected persons in this matter are concerned with adverse effects to water quality and its impacts on human health, marine life, and wildlife. The Commission is responsible for the protection of water quality under TWC Chapter 26 and 30 TAC Chapter 307. The Texas Surface Water Quality Standards ("Standards") in Chapter 307 require that the proposed permit "maintain the quality of water in the state consistent with public health and enjoyment, propagation and protection of terrestrial and aquatic life, operation of existing industries, and economic development of the state." 30 TAC § 307.1. According to § 307.6(b)(4) of the Standards, "[w]ater in the state must be maintained to preclude adverse toxic effects on aquatic life, terrestrial life, livestock, or domestic animals, resulting from contact, consumption of aquatic organisms, consumption of water, or any combination of the three." Additionally, "[s]urface waters must not be toxic to man from ingestion of water, consumption of aquatic organisms, or contact with the skin, or to terrestrial or aquatic life." 30 TAC § 307.4(d). The Standards also require water quality to be consistent with enjoyment and that no toxic effects are produced from contact with the water. Therefore, Issue nos. 4-5 are relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and are appropriate for referral to SOAH.

Monitoring and Enforceability of the Draft Permit

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that the terms and conditions of the draft permit, including its monitoring and reporting requirements are not sufficiently definite to be enforceable. Among other things, the draft permit contains salinity monitoring requirements, narrative criteria for salinity, and biomonitoring requirements. The adequacy of the terms and conditions of the draft permit, including its monitoring requirements, implicates the permit's enforceability and ultimately, its compliance with applicable statutory and regulatory requirements. Therefore, Issue no. 6 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision to issue or deny this permit and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

<u>Modeling</u>

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that the modeling of the proposed Facility's discharge was insufficient. The discharge of the proposed Facility was modeled using the CORMIX modeling program in order to ensure that it will meet the Surface Water Quality Standards contained within 30 TAC Chapter 307. Therefore, Issue no. 7 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision to issue or deny this permit and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

<u>Odor</u>

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that the Facility will cause nuisance odor conditions. Texas Surface Water Quality Standards include general criteria that surface waters must meet, including aesthetic parameters which require that "[c]oncentrations of taste and odor producing substances must

not...result in offensive odors arising from the waters[.]" Therefore, Issue no. 8 is relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and is appropriate for referral to SOAH.

Environmental Equity and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act

Affected persons in this matter are concerned about disproportionate impacts of the Facility on nearby communities, including the Hillcrest neighborhood. Because the TCEQ receives federal funding, it must comply with a suite of federal guidance and laws ensuring its actions are not intentionally discriminatory and will not have discriminatory effects.⁴ For instance, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Executive Order 12898 addresses the environmental and human health conditions of minority communities and low-income communities and calls on agencies to identify and address any disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs. Executive Order 13166 requires federal agencies—and recipients of federal financial assistance—to examine the services they provide, identify any need for services to those with limited English proficiency, and develop and implement a system to provide those services so limited English proficiency persons can have meaningful access to them.⁷

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⁴ See 40 CFR §7.35(b). https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-40/chapter-I/subchapter-A/part-7

⁵ https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs/TitleVI

⁶ https://www.archives.gov/files/federal-register/executive-orders/pdf/12898.pdf

⁷ https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2000-08-16/pdf/00-20938.pdf

TCEQ has made a commitment to preventing discriminatory actions or effects through its Title VI Compliance efforts, which are intended to ensure reasonable access to its decision-making processes. Towards this end, efforts have been made to develop and implement a Disability Nondiscrimination Plan, Public Participation Plan, and Language Access Plan.⁸ Together, these efforts are intended to provide equal access to Commission programs and activities.

However, the specific concerns raised here involving the location of the Facility in an area with minority and low-income populations and any disparate effects on that community are not currently addressed by concrete guidance or permitting rules. Without specific requirements relating to these concerns, they cannot be addressed in proceedings on this application. Therefore, OPIC cannot recommend referral of Issue no. 10 to SOAH.

Process Chemicals

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that not all of the chemicals that will be used by the Facility have been identified in the application. They point out that the desalination process will use chemicals for descaling and to facilitate desalination, but these chemicals have not been evaluated by the ED. OPIC understands this concern, however, the ED does not require this information at this time in the permitting process. An application for a new industrial wastewater discharge permit is not required to include the final design of the facility. In most cases, the specific chemicals to be used have not been finalized

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⁸ More information on TCEQ's Title VI Compliance efforts can by found at: https://www.tceq.texas.gov/agency/decisions/participation/title-vi-compliance

at the time of application submittal. Instead, if submitted, the ED will review any additional information submitted by the Applicant, and may reopen the permit to include additional limitations or monitoring requirements, if necessary. Therefore, OPIC cannot recommend Issue no. 11 for referral to SOAH.

Air Pollution, Infrastructure, Traffic, Tourism, and Noise, Light, and Vibration Affecting Use of Property

Affected persons in this matter are concerned that the proposed Facility's operations will create air pollution, damage infrastructure, increase traffic, create noise, light, and vibration which will limit use and enjoyment of their properties, and adversely affect the local tourism industry. The Texas Legislature, which establishes the jurisdiction of TCEO, has not given the Commission the authority to consider these types of concerns when deciding whether to issue a TPDES permit. With regard to air pollution, water treatment facilities have been found by the ED to not make significant contributions of air contaminants to the atmosphere and that human health and the environment will be protected. Therefore, water treatment facilities have been permitted by rule pursuant to 30 TAC § 106.532. As such, issues with air pollution are not relevant and material to the Commission's decision on this TPDES permit. Additionally, the TCEQ does not have jurisdiction to consider effects on infrastructure or traffic when deciding whether to issue a TPDES permit. Likewise, the specific issues raised by requestors about noise, light, and vibration from truck traffic affecting the use and enjoyment of their properties are not relevant and material to the Commission's decision on this permit. Finally, separate and apart from issues

related to water quality, and impacts to aquatic life and wildlife already recommended for referral, the TCEQ does not have jurisdiction to consider the impact on tourism from the proposed Facility. Therefore, Issue nos. 9, 12, 13, 14, and 15 are not relevant and material to the Commission's decision regarding this application and are not appropriate for referral to SOAH.

G. Maximum expected duration for the contested case hearing

Commission rule 30 TAC § 50.115(d) requires that any Commission order referring a case to SOAH specify the maximum expected duration of the hearing by stating a date by which the judge is expected to issue a proposal for decision. The rule further provides that, for applications filed on or after September 1, 2015, the administrative law judge must conclude the hearing and provide a proposal for decision by the 180th day after the first day of the preliminary hearing, or a date specified by the Commission, whichever is earlier. 30 TAC § 50.115(d)(2). To assist the Commission in setting a date by which the judge is expected to issue a proposal for decision, and as required by 30 TAC § 55.209(e)(7), OPIC estimates that the maximum expected duration of a hearing on this Application would be 180 days from the first date of the preliminary hearing until the proposal for decision is issued.

IV. REQUESTS FOR RECONSIDERATION

The Commission received requests for reconsideration of the ED's decision to issue the draft permit from HRA, Sierra Club, ⁹ Beatriz Alvarado, Jose Gonzales,

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⁹ OPIC notes that according to the Sierra Club's Request for Reconsideration, 189 individual members of the organization have signed on in conjunction with this request.

Jason Hale, Corey Johnson, Daniel Peña, Errol Summerlin, and John Weber. The requests raise concerns about degradation of the area's water quality, increased salinity in the receiving waters, creation of hypoxic conditions, sufficiency of the ED's antidegradation review and modeling conducted in support of the draft permit, and adverse impact to aquatic life, terrestrial life, human health, recreational opportunities, and use and enjoyment of property. The requestors are further concerned that the operation of the Facility will impede local economic development and argue that the Facility should be sited elsewhere, referencing the pending Title VI compliant against the City. Finally, they are concerned about increased light, noise, and traffic.

While OPIC is recommending a hearing and referral of several of the issues encompassing these requestors' concerns as expressed in their requests for reconsideration, a record establishing the evidentiary basis for reconsidering the ED's decision based on these issues would need to exist in order to recommend that any of the requests for reconsideration be granted. As no such record currently exists, OPIC cannot recommend the requests be granted at this time. Finally, concerns regarding impacts to the area's economic development and the Applicant's site selection are outside of the Commission's jurisdiction to consider in a TPDES permitting proceeding, and therefore, cannot serve as the basis for reconsideration of the ED's decision. Similarly, concerns about light, noise, and traffic also lie outside of the Commission's jurisdiction to consider in this proceeding.

V. **CONCLUSION**

Having found that Hillcrest Residents Association, Bruce Switalla, Dale Switalla, Daniel Peña, and Jason Hale qualify as affected persons in this matter, OPIC respectfully recommends the Commission grant their hearing requests and refer Issue nos. 1-8 specified in Section III.B for a contested case hearing at SOAH with a maximum duration of 180 days. OPIC further recommends the Commission deny the pending requests for reconsideration.

Respectfully submitted,

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CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on February 14, 2025, the Office of Public Interest Counsel's Response to Requests for Hearing and Requests for Reconsideration was filed with the Chief Clerk of the TCEQ and a copy was served to all persons listed on the attached mailing list via Inter-Agency Mail, electronic mail, or by deposit in the U.S. Mail.

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