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Franken-water's better than no water at all

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After six years or so in the coffin, the chronically dehydrated Count Dracula is back, thirsty not for fresh blood but for sparkling . . . *sewage water*.

Today, an advisory panel for the city of San Diego wraps up its review of various strategies to recapture a portion of 175 million gallons of partially treated wastewater that's pumped into the ocean every day.

In a virtual desert at the bottom of the Colorado River pipeline, that's like flushing away 175 million gallons of life-sustaining fluids during a persistent drought.

Surely it's time to exploit fully tested technology and recapture the used water.

Now if this hopeful scenario reads like a sequel to a familiar horror story, you're dead on.

In the late '90s, the city's purified wastewater program, the first of its kind west of Virginia, was slurred as "toilet to tap" and politically slaughtered by terrified villagers with pitchforks.

Thanks to former state Assemblyman Howard Wayne and other anti-purification crusaders, refined H₂O was vilified as frightening Franken-water.

That's why it was such a crackup the other day when Wayne told *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter Mike Lee, "You think Dracula died, but in the movies Dracula always comes back for a repeat appearance, and that is where we are right now."

As he was six years ago, Wayne is undead on.

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Look, what matters about water, purified water, is money, not health. Clean water is clean water, no matter what its provenance.

So long as water is scrubbed to scientific standards, no one should give a thought to where the liquid has been hanging out.

It could gush from an artesian well or an Army latrine and I wouldn't give a lick. A mountain spring or the ocean? Pass a glass. The Colorado River or Mike Tyson's sweaty brow? Bottoms up.

You think that's gross? Grow up. Or enroll in a chemistry class.

"In every glass of water we drink, some of the water has already passed through fishes, trees, bacteria, worms in the soil, and many other organisms, including people," wrote Elliott A. Norse, a renowned marine biologist. "Living systems cleanse water and make it fit, among other things, for human consumption."

Water is a glob of molecules. Impurities, the kind that make you sick, are detectable. When they're gone, they're gone.

Through well-understood processes like reverse osmosis and natural cleansing in reservoirs, tainted water can be returned to its primordial state and no one, least of all San Diego's 1.2 million drinkers, will be the worse for it.

The truth is, the Colorado River, which delivers a large slug of San Diego's supply, is a sort of sewer. You wouldn't want to know what treatment plants remove before river water spews out your tap.

Boil down water and you're looking at dollars, not health issues.

As it happens, desalination is the reclamation poster child du jour, nearly devoid of yuck factor, but like wastewater recycling, fairly expensive when compared with imported water.

Polls consistently show that majorities look kindly on desalination while the public turns up its nose at toilet to tap.

The county's desal plants of the future will receive a rich subsidy from the Metropolitan Water District, while the transformation of dirty water to

drinking water is dismissed as the machinations of a Transylvanian monster.

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Without water, this region dries up and most of us would have to leave. In times of scarcity, water is worth . . . *everything*.

"When the well's dry, we know the worth of water," wrote Benjamin Franklin, the sage of practical planning.

As it is, about 90 percent of the region's supply is imported in pipes, a delivery system that has been fairly dependable for the last half century. Nonetheless, the future looks decidedly dicey.

Like a family planning its financial future, the region needs a diversified water portfolio to protect against drought and earthquakes.

In the face of population growth and a depleted Colorado River, science and economics, not superstition and fear, should be driving the region's water strategy.

In an ideal world, which this one rarely is, San Diego County would ride the desal wave while also taking the lead in wastewater recycling.

At the very least, create a pilot project and start changing backward attitudes. Promote toilet to tap with pride, not embarrassment.

Why, San Diego could bottle it and call it something zany like *America's Finest Eau de Toilette*.

Serve it in chi-chi restaurants, at Street Scene and the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon. Make it the water of choice at upscale yoga classes. Send it to schools to enlighten future generations.

Let's bury a wooden stake in the heart of ignorance and toast its death with a cool glass of America's Finest.

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