

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

## S.D. looks north for help marketing recycled water

### Orange County staged successful PR campaign

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FOUNTAIN VALLEY – Orange County water officials watched in horror six years ago as politics and public revulsion drowned San Diego's first attempt at turning sewage into drinking water.

With jaws clenched, they launched an all-out public-relations campaign to preserve their own infant project.

The Orange County Water District hired communications consultants and the captain who was Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf's public-affairs officer during the Persian Gulf War. The agency offered free pizza to residents who would listen to its wastewater treatment plan. It also recruited opinion makers, from ethnic leaders to religious officials, to reinforce its message that the water would be safe to drink.

All told, more than \$3.6 million is budgeted to publicize the \$487 million project.

The efforts seem to be working. Orange County is about one-third of the way through building what will be the world's largest "sewers to showers" water factory. It has become a national model, and some residents of the chronically parched county have even questioned why the district isn't building a bigger plant.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune  
The Orange County Water District's plant under construction in Fountain Valley will produce five times more purified wastewater than the old factory.

"They . . . communicated to the community effectively that this is important to improve the quality of the water and the quality of life," said G. Wade Miller, whose WaterReuse Association in Virginia researches and promotes water recycling.

Orange County's campaign also has provided San Diego with a handy reference on what bureaucrats call "public education" and others call marketing. The city is slowly advancing a \$210 million wastewater recycling program that would help serve drinking water to its 1.2 million customers and meet a demand projected to rise 25 percent by 2030.

City water officials have visited Fountain Valley, the home of Orange County's water district, to learn how that agency succeeded where San Diego failed. San Diego is likely to adopt a communications strategy similar to Orange County's if the City Council approves "indirect potable reuse," or turning wastewater into tap water.

"What happened in the past told us that if we were ever to try this again, a good, solid, accurate public-information program was going to have to be conducted or there would be no hope of getting beyond where we got last time," said Joe Panetta, a big backer of recycled water and president of BIOCOM, the region's biotech industry trade group.

Some marketing experts, however, warn that San Diego's financial and political instability could jeopardize support for wastewater purification when the San Diego City Council takes up the issue later this year. They say that in uncertain times, controversial projects are least likely to move ahead.

Still, many environmentalists and business boosters agree that San Diego needs to recycle more water because the city depends on outside sources, such as the Colorado River, for 90 percent of its supply.

San Diego's first wastewater purification attempt crashed in 1999 amid questions about the safety of recycled drinking water and whether only low-income neighborhoods would receive it.

This time around, San Diego is taking a low-key approach, and city water officials haven't publicly zeroed in on a favored proposal. They are offering six options, some to treat water for in-home use and some aimed at increasing the use of recycled water for parks, highway medians and businesses.

The most attention has been focused on a plan calling for mixing highly treated wastewater with "raw" river water in the San Vicente Reservoir north of Lakeside before treating it again and piping it to homes.

It's almost identical to the Fountain Valley project, except that Orange County stores its water underground instead of in a lake.

In both cases, the agencies say the water delivered to homes will be so pure that minerals must be added back into it. Otherwise, the purified liquid could destroy the pipes by pulling out too many minerals.

A diverse panel of residents, from environmentalists to entrepreneurs, that was convened by San Diego water officials in July strongly supported the city's wastewater purification strategy. The panel also backed increased recycling of nonpotable water.

City water officials took the next step Aug. 15. They presented their analysis of water reuse options to the San Diego Public Utilities Advisory Commission.

The commission, a panel of residents that reviews water projects, probably will make an official recommendation to the City Council's Natural Resources Committee in November.

Fred Zuckerman of Tierrasanta, who sits on a science advisory panel helping the city staff evaluate water reuse options, said San Diego is proceeding cautiously and fairly. But he's not sure the public grasps a compelling water-supply problem that would demand putting heavily treated sewer water into reservoirs.



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune  
Starting in 2007, the Orange County Water District's Fountain Valley plant is expected to provide enough drinking water for the equivalent of 140,000 families.

"We have all the water that we want," Zuckerman said. "But that will end sometime (and) . . . it will become a quality-of-life issue."

## **Water Factory 21**

Winning community support for turning wastewater into tap water probably will be more difficult in San Diego than it has been in Orange County.

The Fountain Valley-based water agency pioneered wastewater purification 30 years ago. It did so at Water Factory 21, the world's first big water plant to use the reverse-osmosis filtration system in treating sewer water to inject into the county's aquifer.

"They had a water-quality track record," said John Ruetten, an environmental marketing consultant with Resource Trends Inc. in Escondido. "The only thing that is going to deal with the 'yuck factor' is trust in the utility."

Also, San Diego's ongoing political and financial problems create a tougher backdrop for lightning-rod proposals, Ruetten said.

"If the landscape of the city is basically right now in a state of high conflict, then it probably is not the best time to be going with an indirect potable reuse sort of pitch," he said.

San Diego also must deal with the remains of its late-1990s water recycling debacle, which lingers in the public consciousness as "toilet to tap."



CHARLIE NEUMAN / Union-Tribune

The plant under construction in Fountain Valley will use the same reverse-osmosis filtration system to treat sewer water that Orange County pioneered 30 years ago at Water Factory 21.

## **Surging ahead**

Orange County is building a system to turn wastewater into tap water that will be the world's largest operation of its kind. It resembles a concept moving ahead in San Diego. Here's how

Even today, the prospect of drinking treated wastewater unsettles many San Diegans, according to last year's city-sponsored phone survey of 406 residents. The poll showed strong support for a range of ways to use recycled water, including irrigating golf courses and manufacturing electronics. But only about one-quarter of respondents favored using it for drinking water.

Poll results also highlighted just how critical a public-outreach campaign will be if the San Vicente Reservoir plan is to survive. When respondents were given more information about safeguards and water testing standards, support jumped to about 50 percent.

"There should be two to four years at least of community support and development and reviewing alternatives before you would actually say you are going to break some ground or commit some capital," Ruetten said.

But no amount of pizza parties or poster presentations is likely to change the opinion of people such as Clair Garrison, a retired telephone company employee in University City. She went "berserk" when she learned in July that "toilet to tap" was back.

"I don't believe they have anything that would clean (wastewater so it becomes) good, fresh water," Garrison said. "Just one glitch and we would be in a hell of a lot of trouble."

Philip Anthony, board president of the Orange County Water District and an avocado grower in Fallbrook, said San Diego is off to a good start by giving community leaders the chance to make recommendations. Still, he's keeping a wary eye on the project.

they stack up:

#### **SAN DIEGO WATER DEPARTMENT**

- Water customers served: 1.2 million.
- Proposed project's annual volume: 10,500 acre-feet.
- Recycled water storage: San Vicente Reservoir.
- Water treatment technologies: Microfiltration, reverse osmosis, UV and hydrogen-peroxide disinfection.
- Cost: \$210 million.
- Status: under review by a city committee.

#### **ORANGE COUNTY WATER DISTRICT**

- Water customers served: 2.3 million.
- Project's annual volume: 72,000 acre-feet.
- Recycled water storage: Orange County aquifer.
- Water treatment technologies: Microfiltration, reverse osmosis, UV and hydrogen-peroxide disinfection.
- Cost: \$487 million.
- Status: scheduled for 2007 completion.

"Please don't have another public disaster that will rub off on us," Anthony said.

### **'Such a disaster'**

At the center of Orange County's outreach effort is Ron Wildermuth, a retired Navy captain who was stationed in San Diego for about five years. He later served as the public-affairs officer for Schwarzkopf, the most famous U.S. military figure in the Persian Gulf War.

Wildermuth was hired to run the Orange County district's communications campaign at about the time San Diego's water purification plan soured.

"It was such a disaster," Anthony said. "We (in Orange County) were really concerned about the public relations."

Wildermuth wasn't sure what he was getting into. But the more he learned about the water recycling project, the more it sounded like the kind of once-in-a-lifetime undertaking he had wanted to tackle.

One thing working in Wildermuth's favor is that the typical Southern California concerns about water shortages are amplified in Orange County by another threat: The aquifer that provides some two-thirds of the water district's supply is continually threatened by infiltrating seawater.

Orange County relies on 28 wells that inject water into the western edge of the aquifer to keep out saltwater. Orange County's future is tied to pumping water into the ground, and the water district says recycled water is a necessary choice.

Water Factory 21, which is being dismantled to make room for the new Groundwater Replenishment System, had been treating wastewater since 1976. But its technology is outdated and its capacity undersized for the growing county.

The new project will produce five times more purified wastewater than the old factory. Excess water will be piped to lakes in Anaheim, where it will be allowed to filter into the groundwater.

Starting in 2007, the plant is expected to provide enough drinking water for the equivalent of more than 140,000 families.

## **Getting public's attention**

The Orange County Water District's communications strategy focuses on face-to-face meetings with influential residents. The agency tries to convince them that water issues demand their attention and that recycling sewage lessens the county's dependence on unreliable and increasingly expensive outside sources of water, such as the Colorado River.

The water district and its sister sewage agency were honored last year for having the nation's best public-outreach program by the WaterReuse Association, the Virginia-based nonprofit group.

The outreach campaign also has secured backing from more than 400 Orange County organizations and leaders, from teachers unions and hospitals to the Surfrider Foundation and Boeing. A key ally is Auxiliary Bishop Jaime Soto, who speaks in support of the project in a video on the water agency's Web site.

Soto said in a recent interview that the purification technology appears sound. He also noted that creative solutions are needed after years of drought that have eroded Orange County's bank of groundwater. And he lauded the water district for reaching out to Latinos.

"I can see the day that further growth . . . can be hampered unless we can assure ourselves that we have water that will keep us going," Soto said.

Nearly every week, Wildermuth and his deputies spend a few days delivering their water reuse message across the county. He doesn't flinch from the hard fact that his agency is starting with sewage, but he dwells on what marketers call the "compelling problem" of water shortages and his agency's solution.

One recent night, Wildermuth made a presentation at a sparsely attended meeting of the Seal Beach Planning Commission. Dressed in slacks, a tie and cream-white shirt, Wildermuth quietly set up his laptop computer.

"There is a looming global water crisis," he began.

On the overhead screen, his computer projected a picture of a young boy walking through a field of flowers with shimmering blue water in the background.

The not-so-subtle message: Recycled water is inextricably linked to Orange County's future. It's just the kind of image that comes in handy when trying to focus attention on how critical water is.

"When I mention purification of sewer water, people's faces get kind of crinkly," Wildermuth said. "(But) what we are doing is creating a new water supply."

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