

The Daily Transcript

Water reuse, conservation should trump desalination

Opponents say more testing needed

By JERAN WITTENSTEIN

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Water reuse and conservation were the major themes discussed Thursday at a meeting organized by Citizens Coordinate for Century 3 to identify where San Diego's future water supplies will come from.

Most speakers expressed the view that before other sources of water are pursued, such as seawater desalination, the region must do everything it can to conserve and recycle its current water budget.

“We’re discharging 180mgd every day, while at the same time we’re talking about putting numerous straws into our ocean and desalinating it,” said Marco Gonzalez, a partner at Coast Law Group LLP and one of three panelists who addressed the group. “Desal; water reclamation ... from a water quality standpoint we are wasting water -- 180mgd, every day.”

Another panel member, former San Diego City Councilman Bruce Henderson, voiced his opposition to water reuse on the grounds that the scientific data on the health effects of recycling water for the purpose of drinking is not conclusive. Henderson cited a National Academy of Science study, which, he said, concluded that reusing water for drinking may or may not have adverse health effects. “It’s imperative that you conduct a community-wide epidemiological study to determine whether or not it in fact makes people sick,” Henderson said.

At the center of the debate is a year-long water reuse study, concluded by the city of San Diego’s Water Department earlier this year. The study outlined six possible strategies the city could pursue in order to utilize wastewater that is currently being pumped out to sea. One proposal would increase the capacity at the North City reclamation plant near University City to facilitate the treatment of 16 mgd of water -- 8 potable and 8 nonpotable.

“At the end of the day, when people are educated that they’re already drinking (recycled water), that the water that would be created from an IPR system would be cleaner than what would be coming in from the Colorado River, it’s the wave of the future. We may not get there in the next year. But we will be there in 10,” said Gonzalez.

Henderson suggested that if recycled water for potable use is pursued by the city, that a written consent with full disclosure from each person who is going to drink that water and a public vote be implemented.

“I propose, as this project goes forward, that we go to the public and ask them whether they want to conduct a health experiment in the city of San Diego.”

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