

The Daily Transcript

We all drink reclaimed water

By Larry Stirling

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Mayor Jerry Sanders has wisely confirmed that he is opposed to the public having to drink water from our reclamation plants. This notion is known by the disgusting sobriquet as the "toilet-to-tap" solution.

The more genteel refer to the notion as "reservoir augmentation."

The fact is that we all drink reclaimed water and always have. The only question is whether the water is reclaimed by God or by the utilities department.

The city staff, instead of fixing potholes in the streets or clearing the drainage channels that flood out Grantville during heavy rains, just spent two years and another million dollars "studying" once again what to do about the reclamation element of our future water supply.

This is especially important, as San Diego has already sunk millions into the construction of sewerage reclamation plants that now sit mostly idle.

As every real San Diegan knows, we import nearly all of our water through fragile straws that reach out to the Sacramento delta in the north and the suffering Colorado River to the east.

Any hiccup in that earthquake-prone delivery system can, and eventually will, result in catastrophic consequences for San Diegans.

I visited Mexico City while the earth was still moving after its worst quake. The No. 1 lesson for any observer: the water supply broke down. No water to drink, let alone to bathe in.

Thousands of pitiful people lined the streets of the Zona Rosa with a horde of colorful plastic containers begging for water.

For decades, San Diego has wrestled with this problem.

Until American forces at Guantanamo Bay had their water supply cut off by Castro, San Diego sported a seawater-reclamation plant. It was hastily moved to Cuba to respond to the threat there.

To the unenlightened, it seems obvious that the right thing to do, given the fact that we live by the ocean, is to convert seawater to fresh water.

Former city utilities director, Dr. Dick King, used to address this point with an asterisk on many of his reports. He referenced "WSEs," which was his own jocular index of relative pollution. The "w" stands for whales. The "e" stands for equivalents. Dr. King blushed when I finally demanded to know what the "s" stood for.

I would blush too, but it clearly makes the point. Not only is there whale "s" in seawater but also their dead bodies and every other bit of chemical and physical detritus that for eons has washed down from the continents.

The last estimate that I heard was that it takes 10 times as much energy to polish seawater into potable fluid as it does to achieve the same results with sewer water.

So while "toilet-to-tap" is a disgustingly accurate way to characterize the city water-reclamation effort, I proposed "crap-to-tap" as an equally fair way to characterize salt-water reclamation.

The ocean is simply much more polluted than the sewage.

However, as the mayor makes clear, there is no political will to "augment the reservoirs" with reclaimed water right now.

What to do?

The fact is that as much as half of our urban water use is for landscape irrigation. Immigrants to our desert community demand that the place look just as green as Ohio whence they came.

The government implements the public will by the creation and operation of huge green parks, roadway landscaping and private property landscape requirements. The foregoing are exacerbated by developmental setback, minimum lot size and floor-area-ratio requirements embedded in community plans.

When water shortages occur, the first sacrifice is the landscape inventory, on the notion that it can be restored later.

That inventory in this county must be the equivalent of billions of dollars and decades of work. Should a catastrophic water shortage occur, much of that would surely be lost.

The logical question is why should drinking water be used on landscape at all. The same question occurs about car washes, groundwater table recharging and hundreds of other needs.

The solution is to incorporate our freeways into a supplemental landscape irrigation system.

Freeways should be plumbed with reclaimed water pipes adequately sized to both supply Caltrans with landscape irrigation, and also to act as mains for other large landscape projects such as Balboa Park, golf courses, industrial uses and so forth.

This would solve several problems at once. First, it would relieve the pressure on the drinking water supply, assuring the public health and allowing for greater sustainability during water shortages.

Second, it would put the existing water reclamation plants to work, validating their investment.

Third, it would guarantee that major landscape inventories would not be sacrificed in a drought while simultaneously sustaining industrial needs.

And finally, it would assure Mayor Sanders that neither "toilet-to-tap" nor "crap-to-tap" would emerge as campaign issues during his re-election.

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