

Water Logic

Editorial

August 2, 2006

Officials at Glen Canyon National Park warn visitors to Utah's Lake Powell to watch for "No Swimming" signs. Some areas of the popular recreation destination regularly become so contaminated with human feces dumped from houseboats that it's simply unsafe to even take a dip in the massive reservoir.

Lake Powell is fed by the Colorado River. It stores water that eventually makes it to San Diego County faucets.

Why do San Diegans not worry about the putrid state of Lake Powell's water? Because the water is cleaned, filtered and tested before it ever makes it to our taps.

But while the dumping of feces in Lake Powell doesn't cause much of a stir in San Diego, the mayor and a few others have raised hell about a proposal to pump heavily treated -- nearly distilled -- water into local reservoirs.

The proposal is simple: San Diego sits on the edge of a desert with virtually no natural sources of water. We have to shell out millions to fund powerful agencies to help us import fresh water from as far away as Utah and Colorado. With droughts and population booms in the western part of this country, we cannot continue to depend so heavily on such a tenuous link to fresh water. Before we let the valuable resource drain into our ocean, we should recycle and reclaim as much of it as we can.

Mayor Jerry Sanders admits that the science supports the safety of a system that allows the city to filter wastewater intensely before sending it up to a reservoir where it will again be treated and tested before ever making its way to our taps.

The mayor admits this, he just says it's gross.

In fact, "yuck" is the only argument critics of the plan continue to make. Yes, there are costs, but bringing water in from the Rocky Mountains is not cheap either.

Critics say the region should focus on advocating for more rights to the Colorado River water and building desalination plants that will filter seawater into drinking water. Those critics say nothing about the fact that cruise ships and Navy aircraft carriers need only travel three miles offshore before dumping their passengers' waste. Why are they more trusting of the desalination plant's filters?

And the mayor hasn't had a press conference yet about the millions of gallons of sewage pouring over the border every year into San Diego via the Tijuana River.

As for the Colorado River, we already rely plenty on it. We should continue to protect our claims to its water, but that will not be enough. The Colorado River will be tapped more and more every year by thirsty cities. Global climate change and recent droughts make reasonable people worry about whether or not we have seriously overestimated the river's ability to sustain our lawn and garden lifestyles.

This isn't toilet water any more than any of the other sources of water we will drink in coming decades. It's not OK to indulge irrational fears just because a large number of people may have them. We need to look logically at our water infrastructure and bolster our supply not just with conservation measures and desalination plants, but with a commitment to using and reusing the precious resource as efficiently as possible before we let it drain into the ocean.

Those who recognize the importance of water to our local economy and the precariousness of living in a desert next to an ocean know how important it is to support efforts like these. Municipalities all across the country, including Los Angeles and Orange County, have embraced the science and recognized their need to reclaim and protect the water that does arrive in Southern California.

It's time for San Diego to join them.

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