

Win the Hearts and Minds to Get Recycled Water

One topic that continues to percolate in both the comments to our forum and in the broader conversation about water concerns the possible use of wastewater, treated to extremely high standards, that would be piped back to San Diego's water reservoirs. There it would be blended with other freshwater supplies before being ultimately drawn down, treated again, and then distributed throughout the city for potable reuse.

Fair disclosure: My late-father, William H. Bruvold, built an academic career at U.C. Berkeley's School of Public Health studying the public's perceptions about reclaimed and recycled water and spent time consulting in San Diego. (For an accessible summary of some of his research on this topic [see this paper](#) from the journal *Water*). By looking at a myriad of surveys my father came to some conclusions. They included:

- 1) Science matters but isn't determinative. Information and data about safety only moves some subgroups.
- 2) Information from TRUSTED sources matters a great deal. In other words, people may not feel comfortable about trying to figure out water issues or distinguishing between the effectiveness of various ways of treating water to tertiary standards but do take cues on this issue from sources which they have trusted in the past. If trusted sources say it is safe people will become much more accepting.
- 3) Acceptance of potable uses usually followed use of reclaimed water for non-potable purposes.
- 4) (A finding that is my favorite) People's perceptions about the taste of their water is inversely correlated to their level of acceptance of reclaimed/recycled water. When people say their tap water tastes "bad" people are more reluctant to accept reclaimed and recycled water.

These findings point a ways forward and offer some important guides to advocates.

- **Stop making it an either/or proposition in respect to reclaimed and recycled water.**

The reality is that MANY parts of the city have limited/no experience with reclaimed water (for a map of the current areas served by reclaimed water [click here](#)). It shouldn't be surprising that the politicians that were the MOST vocal (and successful) in opposing the last major push for non-potable reuse from areas where there was no experience with reclaimed water. A glance at the map suggests that advocates for recycled water had

better be careful and hope that when this proposal actually "gets legs" sleeping giants don't awaken, egged on by politicians who decide to ride the tiger by using the inflammatory rhetoric of toilet-to-tap.

My father might say "good luck with that." I would love to know where one of those politicians, Howard Wayne, now sits on the issue as he contemplates a City Council run. Advocates should start thinking about how to bring reclaimed water south of SR 52 in a cost effective way. Absent that, their chances of success are a great deal lower.

- **Trusted sources matter. advocates need to continue to talk to them.**

Proponents of recycled water have a pretty steep barrier right now. The mayor of the largest city and the editorial page of the major metro daily newspaper are strongly opposed to recycled water.

Other opinion leaders have been much more accepting but advocates need to understand that dynamic and continue to recruit AND PROMOTE individuals of prominence and trust that will endorse the indirect potable re-use of highly treated water. The mayor of San Diego, perhaps the next one, needs to be a cheerleader because, at least for the foreseeable future, he or she has by far the biggest loudspeaker.

- **Stop trying to blind them with science.**

People trust scientists. But they also trust celebrities, sports figures, and others. Go out and recruit a bunch of Chargers and Padres to start drinking the Orange County water which is augmented from re-purified sources. Get a panel of local doctors to endorse (and drink) recycled water.

Put some water in a bottle from Orange County (which injects treated waste water into the ground for later reuse) throw a big prominent label on it and have your supporters at the city council drink it and put in on the dais during meetings and the podium during interviews. Given the different levels of acceptance of the water by gender, go out and recruit some prominent women in the community to endorse reuse as safe and an effective way of augmenting supply.

The science, economics, and environmental findings on recycled water are very compelling. We already drink water from the lower Colorado River which has been "used" by scores of communities upstream. The technology to do this is proven safe and effective. Bogymen like trace pharmaceuticals in the supply are almost akin to debates in the 1950s about communism and fluoride.

However -- and thank goodness -- we live in a democracy and not in some despotic kingdom ruled by technocrats. The science is secondary to public opinion. PEOPLE are going to decide this issue and ultimately it is going to be a battle for their hearts (and taste buds) as much as it is going to be over their minds.

-- SCOTT LEWIS

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