

VOICE OF SAN DIEGO

Drink Local!



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Recently I heard a California water expert call for a "local water movement." He likened this potential new trend to the "local food" movement which offers an alternative to the large scale corporate food industry. How many of us now look for "locally grown" produce at our grocery stores, or buy a weekly supply of fruits and veggies from the farmer's market or farm stand in our town?

I like this concept of a local water movement. According to water expert Peter Gleick at the [Pacific Institute](#), a local water movement would focus on using local resources more effectively, reusing water once it has been brought into a region, minimizing the environmental impacts of water use and management, and prioritizing local actions and management.

[A report](#) recently completed by the Equinox Center, a non-partisan, independent research and policy center focused on sustainability issues in San Diego County, highlights the idea of diversifying San Diego County's water portfolio to include more local sources.

Currently, more than 80 percent of our water is imported from Northern California or the Colorado River. For economic, environmental and water-security reasons, this is neither an optimal nor a sustainable solution to meet the water demands of our region. No one local source has the ability to be the "silver bullet" to our water supply challenges. Rather, we need to explore a number of solutions closer at hand. These include local groundwater, desalination, better storage to capture the limited rainfall in our region, and recycled water.

Many people are familiar with recycled water distributed through the purple pipe system and used to irrigate parks and landscaping and for certain types of agriculture and industrial uses. But there is another option called advanced treatment, purified water or Indirect Potable Reuse (IPR). This entails treating wastewater to the point that it is drinkable, diverting it to a reservoir or aquifer, treating it again and then adding it to the current water supply.

IPR could be a critical addition to a diversified local water portfolio. A second report being released by Equinox Center this week, "[The Potential of Potable Recycled Water](#)" assesses the challenges and opportunities of this source.

Several communities in San Diego County, including the cities of San Diego and Escondido, and the Helix Water District which serves the La Mesa-El Cajon-Lemon Grove area, are considering IPR projects.

Worldwide, advanced treatment technologies have been proven to purify treated wastewater to an excellent quality for human consumption.

In San Diego County, we are at the "end of the pipeline" for both Colorado River and Northern California water, which means we already drink recycled water because other municipalities upstream from us are releasing their treated wastewater into those sources. The benefit of having advanced treatment facilities in our region is that they would create additional steps to treat recycled water. The end result would be water that has fewer contaminants than our existing imported supply.

Equinox Center's research shows that recycled water has been safely used for drinking water for decades in other parts of California, such as Long Beach, Los Angeles and Orange County, and around the country and the globe in places like Scottsdale, Arizona; [Occoquan, Virginia](#) and Singapore.

Not only is it safe, but like most recycling and reuse efforts, advanced treated water has both economic and environmental benefits.

Let's take the economic side first. Potable recycled water is less expensive to produce and deliver than both desalinated and non-potable recycled water. This translates to better water rates for consumers. And while economists expect that the cost of most water supplies will continue to rise over time as the resource gets scarcer and populations grow, the cost of recycled water will rise more slowly than both imported water and desalination.

In addition, recycled water supplies are abundant and are essentially a renewable resource, making it a reliable supply. Reliability and locally controlled pricing are key factors to the success of San Diego business sectors, such as the life sciences and cleantech, which require highly purified, adequate, reasonably priced water supplies to survive and expand.

On the environmental side, recycling would divert wastewater from some of our overtaxed or underperforming treatment facilities, such as the Point Loma Treatment Plant which is currently operating under a waiver from Clean Water Act standards. In that case, recycling more of the City of San Diego's wastewater would reduce the pollution being emptied into the Pacific Ocean and ensure that we are good stewards of local water quality, so that swimmers, surfers, fishermen, divers, boaters and others can enjoy our world- class beaches and marine sanctuaries long into the future.

Next week, the San Diego City Council will consider a final step needed to move the city's IPR demonstration project forward. The Council will vote on whether to allocate funds for the contract to build an advanced treatment demonstration

facility. The Council had previously approved a temporary water rate increase to support the demonstration project so the funds are available. It's time to move on from old misconceptions and nomenclatures about recycled water and to embrace innovative solutions for our water poor region.

I am ready for a new "local water" movement. When people ask me why I'd be willing to drink recycled water I say it makes economic sense, it makes environmental sense and it's even cleaner than what I am already drinking. I believe it would be a great addition to our diversified local water supply. The next time someone asks you what you want to drink, say you want to "drink local"!