RECYCLING & REUSE
Commentary: We must consider reclaimed water
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By Philip R. Pryde

The city of San Diego is to be commended for taking another look at the wider use of reclaimed water, including its use as feed water into the Alvarado and Miramar treatment plants.

When this concept was raised a few years ago, it unfortunately suffered derision, and ultimately was rejected, with scant consideration of some key factors. Let us hope that this time around the discussion can be less emotional and more factual and reasoned than the last time.

The main point that seemed not to be understood in the last discussion is that the use of treated water from the North City Plant might well be an improvement over our main source of drinking water at present. If we compare the outgoing water from the North City Plant to the Colorado River water that we presently use as feedstock into the Alvarado and Miramar treatment plants, the use of North City water looks tenable.

Why? There seems to be a myth that water coming down the Colorado is "pure Rocky Mountain spring water." In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Colorado River water passes through several towns and cities on its way to San Diego, which make use of it and return at least some of it to the river.

More to the point, tens of thousands of recreational users of the river make direct use of it for "fast, fast relief" while floating down it or swimming in it (as do, in some cases, their pets). A portion of this water goes directly into our drinking water plants without prior treatment. It may be argued that it's highly diluted, if that makes people feel better, but it still contains untreated human wastes. And, under another category of potential pollution, let's not forget the radioactive waste dump on the shore of the Colorado River just downstream from Moab, Utah.

Some have cited certain pharmaceutical chemicals that might be in the product water from the North City Plant. These should certainly be studied; we need to know whether or not they pose a problem.

But the point here is: what is happening to these same chemicals in our existing Colorado River feed water? Since this water contains untreated human wastes, shouldn't these chemicals be present in it? And if they aren't detectable in

harmful amounts in the product water from the Alvarado and Miramar treatment plants, this would seem to suggest that these treatment plants successfully remove, or neutralize, them. And if they do, wouldn't they also do the same for any similar chemicals that might be in the North City Plant water?

It may be possible that some of these chemicals go directly into our wastewater system from manufacturing or R&D enterprises. If this is the case, the proper response is for local cities and the county to mandate on-site procedures to remove or neutralize these chemicals before they leave the company's property.

The question of pharmaceutical chemicals certainly ought to be looked at, but since they could be in almost any feed water used in our drinking water treatment plants, these plants must be able to handle them successfully under present conditions. And if they can, then there is no reason not to use water from the North City Treatment Plant, which, aside from the unknown pharmaceutical chemical question, is probably of equal quality to untreated Colorado River water (and maybe better).

And let's do away with the misleading phrase "toilet to tap." There is no such thing as pure feed water into treatment plants. All water on the planet Earth is contaminated by human or other activities in one way or another, even Rocky Mountain spring water (think about wild animals and streams, and about giardia). This is why we build highly sophisticated treatment plants.

The reality is that our choice in San Diego is between "toilet (Colorado River) water directly to Alvarado and Miramar drinking water plants" or "toilet to the state-of-the-art North City treatment plant and then to Alvarado and Miramar."

I'd prefer the latter. I think we all would.

It's clear that San Diego needs to develop new water supply sources, and certainly seawater desalinization, currently under consideration, is among them. But so is using presently available water from the North City treatment plant. We need to let the city study this potential source thoroughly and objectively.

We need to take whatever steps we can toward greater water self-sufficiency. Let's not discard a valuable water source that we already have available to us because of prejudicial use of language and foolish myths about the cleanliness of Colorado River water.

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