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Recycled water

A good way to increase the region's supply

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If there is one thing all San Diegans care about, it is their quality of life. No new project is too small to raise concerns about increased traffic. No population growth is too small to raise concerns about overcrowding.

But beyond growth there are many other factors that determine the quality of our lives. One of the most important is water.

The West is in its fifth straight year of drought. Some experts are saying this could be the region's worst in 500 years. Water levels at the giant reservoirs that hold Colorado River water destined for California and other states are at historic lows. Lake Mead stands at 51 percent full; Lake Powell at 40 percent. And no one knows when the rains will come.

But even in the best of times, water is an important quality of life issue for San Diego. Since we live in a desert, 90 percent of our water is imported – from the Colorado River and from Northern California. If we had to rely on our own water supply, the region could support about 50,000 people. That means close to 3 million of us would have to find some other place to call home.

To make sure that doesn't happen, the San Diego County Water Authority is always looking for more sources of water. Besides importation and ground-water resource development, there are two options: desalination and water recycling.

The water authority announced recently that it was proceeding with plans for a desalination plant at the Encina Power Station in Carlsbad, which at some point in the future may add 80 million to 100 million gallons per day to our water supply. Not bad, but the county uses almost 600 million gallons per day. And by 2030, we are told that we will need 25 percent more.

That leaves the recycling option, the one the public has more reservations about than the other three. That needs to change.

Two modern water reclamation plants – costing nearly $500 million to build – sit in the region, where 17 water agencies recycle. In the city of San Diego, the North City Reclamation Plant produces an annual average of 5 million gallons per day for landscaping and industrial uses. The South Bay Reclamation Plant has an agreement in place to sell 6 million gallons per day. Both plants have considerably more capacity to recycle water, but much of what is recycled to secondary treatment levels currently is dumped into the ocean. That, too, needs to change.

Recently, the city of San Diego launched a one-year, science-based study to evaluate existing and potential uses for recycled water. It will assess such uses as recreational lakes, recharging ground-water basins, toilet and urinal flushing and additional manufacturing and industrial processes. Already, The Torrey Pines Golf Course, UCSD, Miramar Marine Corp Air Station, the Miramar Nursery and Caltrans successfully use recycled water.

Increasing recycled water use will require an intensive education effort. One way to kill any hopes of increasing usage is to attempt to sell the public on the idea of drinking recycled water. The city of San Diego learned that the hard way in 1999.

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