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Letters to the editor

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Recycled water useful but not for drinking

As a recently retired recycled water regulator with a masters degree in microbiology, I would take issue with Marsi Steirer's statement that the recycled water currently used in San Diego County is "absolutely safe" (Letters, Aug. 27).

First, from a science-based point of view, nothing is absolutely safe. Second, the wastewater treatment process used in most of the county's reclamation plants, including those of the city of San Diego, is based on a mid -1970s study (the Pomona Virus Study) that has never been updated. And finally, even with the best of operators, upsets at treatment plants are not uncommon, and the testing for biological contaminants is not real time; i.e., it can take up to 48 hours for the daily test to be fully run and during that time, if the test shows contamination, that recycled water is in the distribution system.

Although almost all recycled water purveyors, as mentioned by Steirer, conduct voluntary testing in the distribution system, there is no uniformity of testing or regulatory oversight to ensure that the tests meet current health standards.

Recycled water is an excellent and necessary resource to use for needs such as irrigation and industry. That said, the recycled water currently used in California is not potable water and cannot be treated as such. That is the reason for the restricted times of use, the purple pipes and the separate distribution systems.

Reasonable precautions can make the use of recycled water safe to use, but not "absolutely safe."

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