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Sanders against sending treated wastewater to tap

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San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders said yesterday he opposes a proposal to turn wastewater into drinking water – after the city's staff has spent more than two years and about \$1 million researching the option.

Sanders' announcement came days before the City Council's Natural Resources Committee is scheduled to address strategies for water reuse.

The proposal for reservoir augmentation, which critics call “toilet to tap,” could get flushed again by city politics just as it was seven years ago. Whatever happens in San Diego is likely to affect water reclamation efforts in other water-short California cities.

“I don't think the public wants to have this issue before them again,” Sanders said.

The mayor said that he doesn't dispute the science behind water repurification but that he rejects such projects as expensive, divisive and unnecessary, given the city's other options for increasing its water supply.

He mentioned alternatives such as desalination and buying more water outside the region. The city imports about 85 percent of its water, and overall water demand is expected to rise 25 percent by 2030.

Marco Gonzalez, a lawyer for environmentalists backing reservoir augmentation, said Sanders' stance will make the project “significantly more difficult” to implement. Still, he remained upbeat about its prospects.

“It makes a lot more sense than continuing to discharge (partly treated sewage) into the ocean,” Gonzalez said. “Whether the mayor is for it now or later, eventually we are confident he will see the light.”

Councilwoman Donna Frye, chairwoman of the Natural Resources Committee, said she's cautious about the risks involved in reservoir augmentation but favors it as a part of the city's overall approach to water reuse.

“The city needs water,” Frye said. “We have to look at all the options.”

Representatives for the other committee members said they had to study the issue in greater detail.

In 1999, the City Council spiked San Diego's first reservoir augmentation proposal after opponents raised concerns about whether the treated wastewater would be sent to largely minority communities. The foes also pointed to a National Research Council report that said “important questions remain about levels of treatment, monitoring and testing needed to ensure the safety” of such projects.

The current run at reservoir augmentation arose from a 2004 legal settlement between San Diego and local conservation groups. The pact compelled the city to look for more ways to recycle water, and the City Council responded by commissioning a \$900,000 report on how to boost water reuse.

The city's two reclamation plants now produce recycled water for irrigation and industrial processes at about 15 percent of capacity.

A year ago, a city-sponsored group of about three dozen community leaders assessed six options for increasing water recycling. Its keystone choice: an estimated \$210 million plan to pipe purified wastewater into San Vicente Reservoir near Lakeside, blend it with other sources of water and then have that mix treated again before it's delivered to customers citywide.

Of all the water-recycling strategies discussed, that one would use the greatest amount of wastewater. Other options focus on using more recycled water for landscaping and industrial purposes.

Yesterday, Sanders dismissed the community group's unanimous approval of reservoir augmentation.

“I don't believe that is the sentiment of the public,” he said.

If the mayor and City Council fail to aggressively pursue water reuse, it “could potentially thrust us back into a litigation situation,” said Gonzalez, the environmental lawyer.

But Sanders said that simply acknowledging the report without taking further action would satisfy the terms of the settlement. He would not speculate about a veto if the City Council voted for reservoir augmentation.

The politics should start to become clearer Wednesday, when the Natural Resources Committee will address the water-reuse report.

As of yesterday, the city's Water Department planned to ask the City Council to officially accept the study – not to implement or fund it.

However, in a draft memo to council members, the department had intended to seek the City Council's guidance on which strategies to pursue. It also issued a warning: “If direction is provided to pursue only non-potable uses for recycled water, the city will continue to underutilize a valuable water resource and continue reliance on imported water supplies without increasing available local supplies.”

Such consequences were no longer mentioned in the latest memo to the City Council.

“I am hoping they will take some action instead of just burying it,” said Fred Zuckerman of Tierrasanta, whom the city consulted on the scientific merits of its water-reuse study.

“It's very disheartening to spend a lot of effort on (a city study) and just have it totally shelved,” he said.

Besides completing the report, the Water Department has spent the past year publicizing the benefits of water reuse.

The outreach campaign has created some momentum for reservoir augmentation. Supporters were guardedly optimistic about the proposal's chances the second time around.

In November, for instance, the city's Public Utilities Advisory Commission urged the City Council and mayor to implement reservoir augmentation.

Since then, environmentalists, other cities and industry groups have jumped aboard. Their letters generally support San Diego's efforts to reuse water, and some specifically embrace reservoir augmentation.

“We all need to work together to make water reuse a new alternative to augment our water supply,” Scott Alevy, vice president for public policy at the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, wrote in a February letter to the City Council.

But opponents remain committed to defeating reservoir augmentation, and some have promised to show up at the Wednesday meeting.

“I don't like the idea of when I go to the tap, thinking that . . . was sewer water,” said Nick Moffit, an apartment manager in North Park who has criticized the concept at a City Council meeting. “It seems to me like they could have come up with better ideas.”

To seriously consider reservoir augmentation, San Diego would need assurance from a long-term health study of people who drink super-treated wastewater, said former Councilman Bruce Henderson. Short of that, he said, the proposal is a “health experiment” on hundreds of thousands of residents.

Safety questions center on drugs and compounds traditionally not tested by water agencies. However, water experts have said that reservoir augmentation resembles the system by which cities use water from rivers like the Colorado, then treat and discharge it back into the river. Downstream, other cities do the same.

As the debate revs up in San Diego, the water industry statewide is watching because there are only a few similar projects in the country.

Mark Millan, owner of the public outreach firm Data Instincts, near Santa Rosa, is working with several cities on nonpotable water recycling. He said San Diego has a chance to be a leader with reservoir augmentation.

“Those projects . . . represent the future that other communities may have to consider” as California's population continues to swell, he said.

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