

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

## A safe and reliable source of water for San Diego

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There is no disagreement that water is fundamental to San Diego's economic sustainability and quality of life. For decades, the San Diego region has relied on water supplied by Northern California and the Colorado River to meet our water needs. However, growth in those regions and federal mandates to reduce our share of Colorado River supplies have forced us to think about how to expand our water portfolio. San Diego imports nearly 90 percent of the water we use, making our region subject to the whims of the water markets.

So, what are our options? Increased conservation is an option we can all agree on. But meeting our long-term water needs will take a lot more than this. Even with the most aggressive conservation estimates, San Diego will need 25 percent more water in 2030 than it uses today.

Our other options include desalination, farm-to-urban water transfers and increasing our use of recycled water. Desalination is extremely expensive, uses a great deal of energy and has yet to be approved by state agencies. The desal plant proposed for Carlsbad threatens to be derailed by changes to the energy market, which will deprive it of much of the power necessary to treat seawater. Farm-to-urban water transfers are also expensive, and continue our reliance on others to meet our own needs.

Given these limitations, public agencies are increasingly looking to recycled water. It's not a new or unnatural concept. Every drop of water on the Earth is recycled, having fed, bathed and sustained our ancestors for millennia. Decades of scientific research have shown that the use of highly treated recycled water is safe and poses no threat to public health. Cities across Europe and in the United States, including San Jose, Palo Alto, Irvine, Denver and many others, use highly treated recycled water to augment drinking water supplies, and for irrigation and industrial use.

Opponents of using recycled water, including this newspaper's editorial page, cite the “yuck factor” as a reason to discount such proposals. We disagree. So do the cities of Poway, Del Mar, La Mesa, El Cajon, National City and Coronado, who have all supported our efforts in water recycling. They know that the water recycling program proposed for San Diego would use recycled water that is significantly cleaner than what we get now from the Colorado River. That means better drinking water with far fewer chemicals than what currently comes out of the tap in San Diego.

We know that San Diegans can see the value in using recycled water when presented with the facts. For the past two years, a dedicated group of San Diegans from all areas of the city and all backgrounds has met to study the ways our city could use recycled water. The 67 members of the City of San Diego Assembly on Water Reuse (“the Assembly”) were selected by the mayor, each City Council office and stakeholder groups. Some members were deeply involved with water conservation, protecting the environment or responsible planning. Others were there because they were involved in their community.

Many of the volunteers didn't know much about water, except that it always came out of the tap when they needed it. Many were skeptical about drinking recycled water.

Over three days in October 2004 and another two days in July 2005, an extraordinary thing happened – all 67 members agreed on their recommendation to the San Diego City Council. They support the use of recycled water in San Diego because they know it is safe.

We have spent many years studying and debating this issue. Now is the time to act. Today, the City Council's Natural Resources and Culture Committee will receive the city's Water Reuse Study Final Draft Report and consider what steps the city should take toward greater use of recycled water.

It is our collective responsibility to find alternative water supplies to meet our long-term needs. This requires a clear vision and bold leadership from our elected officials. To turn our backs on a clean, steady and locally produced supply of water would be akin to knowing a wildfire is bearing down on us and doing nothing to prepare.

In addition, the city must give serious consideration to the indirect use of recycled water, as part of the terms of a settlement with Bay Council, an

environmental group, related to the federal Ocean Pollution Reduction Act of 1994. Failure to act could expose taxpayers to costly litigation.

The future of our region depends on the decisions our elected leaders make today. We must not be misled by political labels and fear of the unknown. Two things are abundantly clear: San Diego must gain greater water independence, and increasing our use of highly treated recycled water is a safe and intelligent way to do that.

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