

City: 3 Years to Recycle Sewage

Published: Wednesday, February 27, 2008, 5:20 p.m.

A San Diego City Council plan to complete a pilot study of sewage recycling – using treated sewage to refill drinking water reservoirs – will take longer than expected, Water Department officials said today.

At a council committee meeting, city officials said the pilot study of the process derided by critics as "toilet-to-tap" wouldn't be finished until 2011. The City Council had aimed to have it completed by July 2009. The actual recycling process is now slated to start in mid-2009; the council had planned to have it start in July.

The study will cost less than Mayor Jerry Sanders and other city officials estimated earlier. When Sanders [vetoed](#) the project in November, he cited its expense as his principal reason for objecting to it. "This is an economic decision," Sanders said then. (The council then overturned his veto.) Water Department officials pegged the cost at \$10 million to \$15 million and said it would require the city to raise water rates. But they could not provide any breakdown for those costs.

Marsi Steirer, the Water Department's deputy director, said today the effort will cost between \$6 million and \$8 million. The bulk of the costs over the two-and-a-half year effort come from the pilot program itself (\$2.5 million), public outreach (\$1.1 million) and a consultant for regulatory issues (\$1.25 million).

The city has applied for nearly \$1 million in state grant funds to pay for it, Steirer said, but hasn't yet identified where the rest of the money will come from.

Several steps must be taken before the project can launch, Steirer said, which will delay its completion beyond the City Council's original goal. When the council approved the plan last year, its members said they wanted the pilot study to begin July 1.

But Steirer said the city needs to study how the recycled sewage can be retained in San Vicente Reservoir for a requisite year to allow it to dilute, launch a multi-year public education campaign and ensure the Department of Public Health issues a permit allowing the city to use treated sewage to boost reservoir levels. Though Orange County is already recycling sewage to increase its drinking water supplies, it is funneling the water into groundwater aquifers, not reservoirs.

Bruce Reznik, executive director of San Diego Coastkeeper, an environmental group that has supported sewage recycling, told the council he was concerned Sanders was purposely delaying the project because of the mayor's earlier veto.

"There is concern about how the mayor is going to implement it," Reznik said. "It is too important an issue not to move forward as quickly as possible."