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Drug traces found by local water supplies

Southern California's main water supplier, the Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Water District, routinely tests for and finds minute traces of drugs in its water supplies, officials said last week.

But Metropolitan doesn't report the findings because neither the state nor federal government require it, a spokesman said.

Metropolitan supplies drinking water to nearly 18 million Southern California residents in six counties, including San Diego and Riverside.

Mic Stewart, Metropolitan's water quality manager, said officials are waiting for health authorities to determine whether the trace amounts of drugs in drinking water were harmful, and whether they needed to be reported and eradicated.

"We're finding these (drugs) at parts-per-billion to parts-per-trillion," Stewart said. "You would have to drink 300 million liters of water ---- enough to fill 20 Olympic-sized swimming pools ---- just to equal one therapeutic dose.

"No one knows what it means when they occur at such low levels."

Stewart and Jim Green, Metropolitan's assistant manager of water operations, said the massive agency has spent millions to upgrade treatment systems at its five plants, moving from chlorine-based treatment to ozone-based treatment.

Stewart said bubbling ozone through water to clean it removes more drugs than chlorine. But traces of drugs remain. Changing over to reverse-osmosis filters that could totally remove drugs and medicines, Green said, would cost billions of dollars --- which would be added to water bills.

Stewart and Green said they were not worried. Asked if they still drank the agency's tap water, they replied, "Absolutely."

The San Diego County Water Authority plans to open its first treatment plant in April, a \$170 million plant in Twin Oaks Valley. It will also use ozone and other high-tech treatment systems, but not reverse osmosis.