

LOS ANGELES TIMES

May 15, 2008

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L.A. prepares massive water-conservation plan

The initiative would punish water wasters and limit such activities as watering lawns and washing vehicles.

And it would revive a controversial effort to recycle sewage water.

With vital and often-distant water sources shrinking, Los Angeles officials today will revive a controversial proposal to recycle wastewater as part of a plan to curb usage and move the city toward greater water independence.

The aggressive, multiyear proposal could do much to catch the city up to other Southern California communities that have launched advanced recycling programs.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's effort could cost up to \$2 billion and affect a wide range of daily activities. For example, residents would be urged to change their clothes' washers, and new restrictions would be placed on how and when they could water lawns and clean cars.

Financial incentives and building code changes would be used to incorporate high-tech conservation equipment in homes and businesses. Builders would be pushed to install waterless urinals, weather-sensitive sprinkler systems and porous parking lot paving that allows rain to percolate into groundwater supplies.

Just to meet a 15% increase in demand by 2030, officials say 32 billion gallons a year will have to be saved or recaptured -- enough to cover the San Fernando Valley with a foot of water.

Prohibitions during the 1990s drought -- banning residents from washing driveways and sidewalks, letting sprinklers flood into gutters and watering grass in midday -- would be enforced again, with additional restrictions. One part of the proposal would limit lawn watering to certain days of the week.

"This is a radical departure for the city of Los Angeles," said Department of Water and Power General Manager David Nahai. "I think overall this plan is going to be a beacon for other cities."

In fact, cities facing the same challenges, including Long Beach, have already moved to curtail residential and commercial water usage and punish waste. Orange County and other Southern California agencies are also recycling treated sewage water back into the drinking supply.

Los Angeles' plan -- a copy of which was made available to The Times -- would invest in projects to capture and store rainfall and clean up a sprawling, contaminated water supply beneath the San Fernando Valley. About \$1 billion would be allocated for reclamation, including a politically sensitive plan to use treated wastewater to recharge underground drinking supplies serving the Valley, Los Feliz and the Eastside.

A similar system was approved and built in the 1990s, then abandoned after critics labeled it a "toilet-to-tap" scheme.

The city learned from its earlier "aborted attempt" at water recycling, Nahai said.

"This is a new day," he said. "We have new technology. We're going to reach out very aggressively to the public and engage them as to the facts."

One critic said voters should decide whether the water supply will be blended with treated wastewater. "It's grossly unfair for the mayor, the City Council or the DWP to decide consumers are going to be using this recycled water," said Gerald A. Silver, president of Homeowners of Encino.

But Millie Hamilton, an Encino Neighborhood Council member and docent at the city's Tillman Water Reclamation Plant, said recycling is safe, needed and nothing new. "There is no new water on this planet," said Hamilton, who was referred to The Times by the mayor's office. "We are drinking the same water the dinosaurs drank. All our water has been and is being recycled."

The ambitious water plan carries political risks for the mayor, but also could burnish his record as an environmental leader in a bid for higher office. A number of key details remain to be worked out and vetted by the City Council, including the cost of various elements and how they would be financed.

On the heels of a recent DWP water rate hike, Nahai said no additional increases are anticipated. Most parts of the program can be funded from state water grants, the DWP's existing budget and going after polluters who have fouled city groundwater. But future fee increases may be needed, he acknowledged.

David Coffin, a Westchester Neighborhood Council member who tracks water issues, said the plan misses a larger point: controlling growth.

"I don't think they're going to make any headway. They're adding 14,000 to 16,000 housing units a year in the face of water shortages. How are they going to supply all those people?"

Administration officials say the point is to act now so the city can meet increased demand through a combination of conservation and recycling. They note that Los Angeles is an arid metropolis that has grown by dipping long straws in far-flung water supplies.

But recent court rulings, environmental agreements and competition from other urban centers are cutting flows or sharply increasing costs of water from the Owens Valley, the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and the Colorado River.