

## Enviros and Sanders Cut a Deal on Sewage



Local environmental groups Tuesday tentatively agreed to support another waiver of Clean Water Act standards at the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant. Photo: Sam Hodgson  
By [ROB DAVIS](#)

**Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2009** | The on-again, off-again fight between San Diego officials and the environmental community about the pollution discharged by the city's major sewage treatment plant is once again peaceful.

Mayor Jerry Sanders and local environmental groups reached a tentative agreement Tuesday that would trade the environmental community's support of another waiver of Clean Water Act standards at the Point Loma plant for a thorough study of San Diego's sewage infrastructure. The city will hire a consultant to develop strategies and options for reusing wastewater instead of dumping it in the ocean.

The plant currently treats and dumps about 175 million gallons of sewage daily into the Pacific Ocean. It operates with a permit that allows it to discharge sewage that doesn't meet federal pollution standards, failing to remove the amount of waste required by the Clean Water Act. But an upgrade to the plant, tucked into the western bluffs near Cabrillo National Monument, could cost as much as \$1.5 billion, the city estimates.

The settlement with San Diego Coastkeeper and the Surfrider Foundation commits the city to spending as much as \$2 million to develop strategies for reusing sewage, decreasing the amount that gets dumped in the ocean. The settlement needs City Council approval, which could come in early February.

Those could include a wide range of options such as building smaller sewage recycling facilities throughout the city or expanding distribution infrastructure for recycled wastewater.

The agreement gives the city a united front in its pursuit of a waiver from state and federal regulators. The city has always been spared from the costly upgrade, in part because it has [demonstrated](#) that the sewage is not harming marine life offshore. But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which in December [approved](#) the city's waiver request, said it wanted to see progress in San Diego -- the last major West Coast city holding a waiver.

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[City Sewage Satisfies Sanders, Scientists \(Oct. 11, 2007\)](#)

The EPA's message: Stop wasting wastewater. In arid San Diego, which is confronting its most serious water-supply crunch since the early 1990s, the value of every potential water source is increasing. And with San Diego poised to request another waiver in five years, the EPA's advice carries weight.

Environmental groups and the EPA see two benefits to reusing sewage: The city can increase water supplies while reducing the amount of pollution dumped into the ocean. Their goal is to move beyond the long-running debate about the Point Loma plant's future and treatment levels, said Bruce Reznik, San Diego Coastkeeper's executive director, and begin developing sustainable, long-term plans for the city's sewage infrastructure.

The study, expected to take two years, should give the city a range of options for increasing sewage reuse, Reznik said. He said he believed the study puts the city on a path to a day when it discharges no sewage into the ocean.

Sanders said achieving that goal would be "difficult at best." But the mayor said the study would lay the groundwork for a decentralized city sewage treatment system -- one that would not route every toilet flush to Point Loma and the Pacific. Sewage could be reused for "irrigation and industrial purposes," Sanders said.

The mayor did not include reusing sewage for drinking water supplies in that range of options. The study will examine the concept despite Sanders' opposition.

If an ongoing sewage recycling pilot study concludes the practice is safe for human health, Sanders said he believed its use should be limited to one location. The city is evaluating whether recycled sewage could be used to recharge the San Vicente Reservoir.

Sanders said the settlement would allow the city to consider where the demand is greatest for recycled water and determine how to best serve that need. Increasing irrigation with recycled sewage would free up drinking water currently used that way.

"We have to take a look at our wastewater system and project what we're going to do in five-year increments," the mayor said. "This allows us to do that."

The city currently has two treatment plants that can recycle sewage for irrigation, but their use has been limited. San Diego lacks the purple-pipe infrastructure to distribute it.

The city will determine the study's scope by March 31, Sanders said. The finished product will be peer-reviewed; environmental groups will also have an independent expert review it.

Those groups have precedent for including a study in a settlement agreement. A 2002 settlement with the city over Point Loma sewage-treatment standards resulted in a study of sewage recycling. That study evaluated whether sewage recycled was economical and safe to be consumed by humans. (Scientists say it is.)

Reznik said the earlier effort laid the groundwork for lobbying the City Council and securing approval in 2007 for an ongoing pilot study of sewage recycling. He credited it with helping to temper the toilet-to-tap stigma that was attached to the city's attempt at launching sewage recycling in the 1990s.

The council will likely discuss the settlement in early February. A spokeswoman for Council President Ben Hueso said he supports it.

"We have a serious situation with water in San Diego and everything we do to develop a (water) supply that relies on as many different sources as we can and minimizes environmental impact he's 1000 percent in favor of," spokeswoman Michelle Ganon said. "He's delighted to hear about the settlement."