SIGN ON SAN DIEGO

The yuck factor: Get over it

BY UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD
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As San Diego sprawls above 3.5 million people countywide in just 10 more years, and a projected 4.4 million by 2050, the greatest threat to our economic health and quality of life is an uncertain supply of water. This urban cul-de-sac at the bottom of California is at the tail end of the pipelines that deliver 80 percent or more of our water. That means we are heavily dependent on the mercy of others, and that is not comforting.

San Diegans have more than proved themselves willing to conserve; the city uses less water in real terms today than it did with a smaller population 20 years ago. That will continue to be a crucial part of the region's water strategy for decades. So, too, will be the development of new sources, such as desalination. And, of course, political battles to rescue the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta from environmental collapse in order to keep Northern California water flowing south will be never-ending.

But the reality is that more must and can be done.

At San Diego's North City Water Reclamation Plant, work recently began on an $11.8 million pilot project – financed mostly through a temporary water rate hike that ended last September – to demonstrate whether purified wastewater can be made safe to drink and affordable to produce in large quantities.

Once up and running in May, the plant will take treated wastewater already safe for use in landscaping and industrial processes, then purify and scrub it some more to nearly distilled water standards. The demonstration project is to produce 1 million gallons a day for a year, during which it will be continually monitored and studied, but not distributed for public consumption. If it proves safe and affordable, the city could then consider its expansion to a permanent plant that could produce up to 16 million gallons a day, which would be piped to San Vicente Reservoir.

Frankly, there is not that much to demonstrate, at least scientifically.

Similar technology is already in large-scale use in Orange County, which produces 70 million gallons of purified wastewater each day for injection into the county's aquifers for public consumption. Similar systems are also producing drinking water for Montebello, Scottsdale, El Paso and other American cities, along with Singapore, Brisbane and the International Space Station.

But there would be much education of the public to be done.

Similar efforts in years past were dubbed by critics, including this editorial page, as “toilet-to-tap” technology. But this editorial board has come to accept the latest science – and real-life experience – that says this water would likely be the purest and safest water in the system.

Still, there would be a significant yuck factor for many residents to overcome. In our view, it’s time to get over it.