



Report: Wastewater preferable to wasting water

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By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

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Drinking wastewater? The idea may sound distasteful, but new federally funded research says more Americans are doing so — whether they know it or not — and this reuse will be increasingly necessary as the [U.S.](#) population expands.

Treated wastewater poses no greater health risks than existing water supplies and, in some cases, may be even safer to drink, according to a report released Tuesday by the National Research Council, a science advisory group chartered by Congress. "We believe water reuse is a viable option" to deal with growing water scarcity, especially in coastal areas, says Jörg Drewes, an engineering professor at the [Colorado School of Mines](#) who contributed to the report.

By Mark Greenberg, for USA TODAY

Mechanic Phillip Castro does a routine inspection of the water treatment systems at a plant in San Antonio.

"This can be done reliably without putting the public at risk," he says, citing technological advances. He says it's a waste not to reuse the nation's wastewater, because almost all of it is treated before discharge. This water includes storm runoff as well as used water from homes, businesses and factories.

Of the 32 billion gallons of wastewater discharged every day in the [USA](#), the report says 12 billion — equal to 6% of total U.S. water use — is sent to an ocean or estuary and is thus a lost resource.

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Many communities reuse wastewater for irrigation and industrial purposes. Some — notably Cloudcroft, N.M., and California's Orange County — have treatment facilities to reuse it as drinking water.

In many places, the report says, the public does not realize it is drinking water that was treated after being discharged as wastewater somewhere upstream. For example, wastewater discharged into the [Trinity River](#) from Dallas/Fort Worth flows south into Lake Livingston, the source for Houston's drinking water.

Despite the growing importance of this "de facto reuse," the report says there has been no systemic analysis of its extent nationwide since a 1980 study by the [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

"There's always someone downstream," says Alan Roberson of the American Water Works Association, a non-profit group dedicated to clean water. He says wastewater reuse is common, so the council's report is important but not surprising.

Roberson says he expects this recycling will continue to increase, especially for irrigation and industrial needs.

He says it will take longer to establish potable uses because of public skittishness about drinking wastewater, however treated.

"We have to do something" to address water scarcity, says Olga Naidenko, a senior scientist at the non-profit [Environmental Working Group](#). She says less than 10% of potable water is used for drinking, cooking, showering or dishwashing.

"We flush it down the toilet, literally," she says. Technologies exist to safely treat the water, she says, although some are expensive.

The report says water reuse projects tend to cost more than most water conservation options but less than seawater desalination and other supply alternatives. It calls on the EPA, a co-sponsor of the report, to develop rules that set safe national standards.

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9 comments

[Add a comment](#)**Connie Wilhite** · Waite High School

So why do we keep letting more people in? And of course, they immediately need financial assistance to live.

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**Bob Smith** · Top Commenter

It is strange isn't it that when we can see the future so plainly we continue to do things that will hurt us in the long run. I guess it really is like Pogo said "we have seen the enemy and he is us" or something like that.

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**Ali Kavrak** · Technical University of Sofia

@connie.. wow that is such an ignorant comment. So, if you had a child that wouldn't contribute to the increase of population? Get your head out of your ass and get a clue!

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**Dave Magnusen** · Top Commenter

Ah, a glimmer, if you can see it - water will be the new gold. scarce and valuable.

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**Larry Hubble** · Top Commenter · Phoenix, Arizona

Actually, Dave, you are right. Water is going to become increasingly valuable. All the gold in the world will not replace life-giving water. And, of course, global warming has an affect on the water supply.

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**Gary Finger** · Top Commenter

Larry Hubble remember to tell the people in Texas about the global warming that has dried up the state so bad, they could use some waste water and soon.

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**Salomeh Ghorbani** · Top Commenter · Germantown, Maryland

Hmm....no reference to the fact that pharmaceuticals are NOT cleansed form the wastewater? There have been multiple reports about anti-depressants, hormones, and other meds in wellwater, rivers, and other water sources as a result of our consumption of them.....

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**Wayne Wastier** · Top Commenter · Pastor;Teacher;Consultant at Peace of God Ministries

Desalination of our oceans water is becoming more and more economical as our technology in this field increases. Soon water shortages will not be an issue anymore, or at least not for many hundreds of years.

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**Bob Smith** · Top Commenter

I have drunk recycled waste water many times. And it is not bad as soon as you convince yourself those are not really little pieces of s--- in the bottom of the glass or that the water doesn't taste like p. Also being so thirsty you would consider drinking p helps it go down.

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**Michael McCain** · Works at United States Navy

Freedom is great but abuse of freedom is soon going to necessitate its restriction. Overpopulation is a big



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