



## BILL SEEKS TO STREAMLINE RECYCLED WATER REGULATIONS

### Assemblyman Hueso says ‘perfectly drinkable water’ is being poured into ocean

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Sacramento

Every year California dumps enough wastewater into the ocean to fill Lake Oroville, one of the state’s largest sources of drinking water. Even thirsty San Diego pours thousands of gallons of wastewater into the Pacific off Point Loma every day.

The reasons this supply-starved state wastes so much wastewater are both simple and substantial. There is a natural recoil to drinking water that has been flushed down the toilet, even after it’s been cleaned. New plants and high-tech treatment can be cost-prohibitive. Moreover, the state has enacted a Byzantine array of regulatory controls that critics say strangle agencies seeking permits to clean and send recaptured wastewater to taps.

And that’s where legislation carried by Assemblyman Ben Hueso, D-San Diego, comes in.

“My bill has the impact of creating more storage across the state without big expensive dam projects,” Hueso said.

Here’s how:

- Wastewater would be regulated depending on the level of treatment. The goal is to make it easier, quicker and cheaper for districts to mingle the cleanest — called “advanced treated purified water” — with groundwater and reservoir supplies. The state Department of Public Health, after adopting updated standards, would take over the permitting responsibility from the state Water Resources Control Board and its affiliated regional agencies.

- Dozens of related regulations and codes would be redesigned to streamline permits. Agencies would have to pay more filing fees, but those supporting the bill said that’s worth it because delays caused by wading through different regulatory processes are even more expensive.

The measure is likely to come up on the Assembly floor this week, and is expected to also undergo significant modifications this summer before a compromise could be struck sending it to Gov. Jerry Brown, who has not taken a position.

San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce officials were in the Capitol recently lobbying for various causes, including Hueso’s measure.

Chamber President Ruben Barrales recognizes that creating tap water out of wastewater is expensive. “It costs a lot less than not having water,” he reasoned. “It’s insurance.”

Water agencies are under mounting pressure to recycle more water as the state grows and supply shrinks. State law already requires districts to recycle 2.5 million acre-feet by 2030. That’s enough to serve 5 million average Southern California homes for a year.

“We are pouring perfectly drinkable water into the ocean,” Hueso said, referring to supplies that could be treated up to health standards.

A 2009 state report suggested that up to 1.4 million acre-feet of wastewater could be recirculated back to taps. And the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst has said returning wastewater to the general supply is one of the “least cost, highest gain” alternatives to increasing availability.

Nevertheless, Hueso’s Assembly Bill 2398 has drawn fire from the vocal Russian River Watershed Protection Committee based in Northern California. Its members oppose provisions taking some permitting authority away from regional water quality boards. Also, there are complaints that required reporting of unauthorized discharges of some types of wastewater are too lax.

Several residents have also lodged protests. Howard Wilshire of Sebastopol, for example, wrote that more stringent standards and regulations are needed.

“In view of the rapidly growing body of scientific evidence of the drastic effects of poorly regulated discharges of toxic materials into our waterways on aquatic and human life, a proposal to reduce the standards for discharge of treated, but still contaminated, waters is not defensible,” said Wilshire, a retired federal geologist.

Some environmentalists are wary given the complexity of more than 70 pages of Hueso’s proposed changes to highly technical state law governing wastewater reclamation.

Jill Witkowski, legal clinic director for San Diego Coastkeeper, said “some of our partners have raised concerns about this bill that we are looking into.” The local group has not settled on a position, but “we are excited to see water recycling being addressed at the state level. It’s crucial from an environmental standpoint and water security standpoint to facilitate water recycling.”

Price also has been a nagging issue, beyond plant construction costs. But just like turning seawater into drinking water, the cost of capturing wastewater is coming down with technological advances, supporters say.

“As far as recycled water goes, it’s the most important bill in the last 20 years,” said Deven Upadhyay, a water resources manager for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.

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