

Sewage Plan Envisions Massive Expansion of Wastewater Recycling

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Early next year, San Diego will finish a landmark pilot project meant to prove to health regulators that the city can safely recycle sewage by purifying it into drinking water. Then a major question awaits: What next?

A two-year city study, due to be presented to a City Council committee Wednesday, answers that question and other big unknowns, like how much it would cost to recycle sewage, where purification facilities should be built and how much sewage could be diverted from a major treatment plant in Point Loma.

The blueprint sets a goal for San Diego to recycle 100 million gallons of sewage daily in coming decades, saying its cost would be comparable to increasingly expensive — and volatile — imported water supplies. That would represent roughly 20 percent of the region's supply.

The study, a draft of which was obtained by Voice of San Diego, leaves San Diego poised to make the largest paradigm shift in how it handles its wastewater since the city stopped dumping raw sewage in San Diego Bay and began treating it in the 1960s. The city's sewage could become a valuable commodity, not the burdensome moniker it is today: Wastewater.

The report calls for a major, multi-billion-dollar expansion of San Diego's water-reuse infrastructure, with new purification facilities in Point Loma, University City and the South Bay. If adopted, San Diego would join Orange County as a major pioneer in the American Southwest's fledgling efforts to turn sewage into a drinking water source.

Today, San Diego imports billions of gallons of water annually from far-off sources, a practice that consumes massive amounts of energy and leaves the region vulnerable to supply interruptions. After traveling hundreds of miles to San Diego, the water is consumed once and flushed down the toilet before being treated and pumped into the Pacific Ocean.

Droughts, regulatory restrictions and the threat of climate change have exposed the frailty of that system and made imported water increasingly expensive. Against that backdrop, environmentalists and federal regulators have pressured San Diego to expand sewage reuse. San Diego's major sewage treatment plant, which sits on the Point Loma bluffs near Cabrillo National Monument, is outdated, today operating under a temporary waiver of federal pollution rules.

The city has balked at an upgrade because of its \$1.2 billion price tag. That cost could drop to \$710 million if San Diego fully implements the sewage recycling strategy.