


[Print Page](#)

Officials look for water alternatives

By *BRIAN WALKER*
Staff writer

Agencies compare notes with San Diego expert in river cleanup efforts

POST FALLS -- When Bill Pearce speaks on reusing wastewater, local agencies faced with cleaning up the Spokane River listen.

The American Water Works Association brought the city of San Diego's water research manager to the area this week to discuss what that chapped region has done to make use of treated wastewater and reduce how much enters streams.

After visiting with local agencies wrestling with the cleaning up the river, Pearce said using treated wastewater to match industrial and landscape demands would be a smart move here.

"Your local water engineers and managers appear to have responded wisely and cost effectively to the needs of your community," he said. "However, to protect the Spokane River and future supplies, major proactive action is now needed."

Stephen Tanner, who works in the Coeur d'Alene office of the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and is on the AWWA's regional board, said wastewater reuse will likely become a big part of the picture to clean the river.

"We wanted Bill to share his wealth of knowledge and see what can be done with reuse without degrading the aquifer," Tanner said.

San Diego treats about 9 million gallons of wastewater per day for reuse, mostly for irrigation, with the ability to eventually treat 45 million gallons per day.

Pearce and his team were on the verge of gaining approval of a "toilet to tap" program with its treatment in the 1990s before it hit a political wall.

"The newspaper ran a photo of me drinking the water," he said, adding that that didn't help the approval



SHAWN GUST/Press

Bill Pearce, water research manager with the City of San Diego Water Department, left, talks about how the water treatment system in southern California differs from local treatment facilities Tuesday with Terry Werner, public works director for the city of Post Falls, and Stephen Tanner, with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

process.

Local officials said North Idaho won't have to go to that reuse extreme anytime soon because the aquifer, the region's underground drinking water source, remains prolific.

But what area agencies are having to deal with is cleaning up the Spokane River to restore the stream's health. The cities of Post Falls and Coeur d'Alene and the Hayden Area Regional Sewer Board, along with several Washington agencies, dispose treated wastewater that contains phosphorous and other plant nutrients into the river that threaten fish.

The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to mandate further phosphorous removal when it determines the new discharge permits. Dischargers expect that to be an expensive -- if not impossible -- transition and are examining alternate discharge methods including irrigating nurseries, landscapes and highway greenbelts.

While HARSB already land applies during the summer and Post Falls and Rathdrum have purchased Rathdrum Prairie property for the method, it's a delicate subject with the aquifer below. Cities are also doing pilot tests on new technologies.

Local agencies are working with the Idaho Transportation Department to explore irrigation of greenbelts along Interstate 90, a concept underway in San Diego along with industrial uses of treated wastewater. Post Falls Public Works Director Terry Werner said the method has been slow to mature in Idaho due to concerns of the water flowing onto the highway.

Local agencies have also started medication turn-in programs so the outdated or unused pharmaceuticals are not flushed down the toilet and threaten water sources. The river and aquifer are intertwined in some areas.

San Diego uses reverse osmosis, ultraviolet disinfection and peroxide to treat pharmaceuticals and personal care products in the wastewater. Salt is also removed to allow for irrigation.

"It is really ultra-pure water," Pearce said.

Local cities are interested in taking the next step to see how bad the problem of pharmaceuticals and other products are, but the costs for treatment and equipment would have to be weighed, Werner said.

"At this point I don't believe treating would happen but we may want to do some sampling to see what kind of levels we have," he said. "I have heard that testing of these samples is in the \$1,200 range, depending on all what you sample for."

Werner said the city has also gotten away from using chemicals in its treatment because it felt it was the right thing to do.

Post Falls City Administrator Eric Keck said Idaho is behind the curve with wastewater reuse.

"My takeaway from (Pearce's visit) was how close-minded Idaho has been to the concept of reuse and how we really need to focus on educating everyone from state leaders on down to the citizenry of the importance of looking toward reuse as a viable means of ensuring the quantity and quality of the water that is within our treasured Rathdrum Prairie aquifer," Keck said. "We will need the Legislature to assist us with reuse as there currently are too many complex laws that serve as an impediment to truly encourage the reuse of water."