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Agencies ready to move on sewer recycle

Lawsuit settled, 'toilet to tap' can now proceed

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At first murky but now coming into focus—a plan that would divert Tapia sewer plant's recycled water away from Malibu Creek and turn it into safe drinking water could give consumers an important new potable source that promises to beat the drought.

Although tagged with an unsavory title—"toilet to tap"—the plan will create a valuable new source of clean water for the region and at the same time allow the sewage treatment plant near Calabasas to cease running afoul of the federal and state standards that have been dogging it for years.

The venture—called the Pure Water Project—brings to an end a lawsuit filed by the Las Virgenes and Triunfo joint powers authority that sought to mitigate the costly and difficult-to-meet water quality standards imposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Instead of proceeding with the lawsuit, the JPA announced it would focus instead on its plan to turn sewer effluent into drinking water—a once unthinkable process now made possible by advances in water purification technology. The move also helps to keep the frequent surpluses of treated sewer water from being discharged into Malibu Creek, Triunfo Sanitation District vice chair Mike Paule said.

"Ultimately, we've reached a point where we feel the litigation is no longer necessary because we have a permit we feel we can live with," Paule said. The Tapia sewer plant off Las Virgenes Road in Malibu Canyon treats about 10 million gallons of wastewater per day.

During warm weather months, the treated water is used to irrigate parks, golf courses and public landscaping. But in the cooler, wet months the surplus isn't needed and is discharged into both Malibu Creek and LA. River.

Thirsty for litigation

In 1999, Heal the Bay and Los Angeles Waterkeepers sued the EPA, saying the federal agency was not working quickly enough to adopt strict measures that would keep the Los Angeles and Ventura County watersheds free from pollutants.

The EPA responded by strengthening the regulations to control nutrients, sedimentation and algae in the local watershed—a move that threatened to leave 100,000 ratepayers in the local communities on the hook for the cost of compliance.

In 2013, the Las Virgenes and Triunfo joint powers authority sued the EPA to have the regulations relaxed.

Later, deciding its best course of action is to keep the sewer effluent away from the creek altogether, JPA officials began formulating a plan for storing the excess recycled water. They also discontinued their litigation.

David Pedersen, general manager for Las Virgenes Municipal Water District, called the decision to turn reclaimed sewer water into drinking water “a game-changer.”

The plan

Las Virgenes and Triunfo plan to construct a \$100-million treatment plant and pipeline that will take Tapia’s reclaimed water, purify it, and send it to the Las Virgenes Reservoir in Westlake Village for storage.

“The original strategy to comply with (stricter discharge standards) was going to cost the same amount, but it provided no benefit to our customers because we would treat the water only to release it into the creek. So we decided to invest where it would produce some benefit. That’s when the Pure Water Project was born,” Pedersen said.

The JPA dropped its lawsuit—and terms of the settlement require each side to cover its own legal costs.

The agreement gives the JPA 13 years to put its new plant into operation and meet all regulations. The EPA at first wanted immediate compliance.

“They were very reasonable and supportive because they realized that we’re doing the right thing,” Pedersen said.

“I see this as a positive turning point. It’s a chance to work cooperatively with the other partners in the watershed and on a solution that benefits customers and the environment,” the general manager said.

Who will pay?

While it’s not known if, or how much, local water rates will go up—consumers already are in the middle of five straight years of water and sewer price increases—the new recycling plant could save users money in the long run.

The cost of wholesale water imported by the JPA from Metropolitan Water District is said to double about every 10 years, but if the local agencies can turn sewer effluent into drinking water and buy less potable product from Metropolitan, the end cost for consumers might stabilize.

“People are starting to understand that there is no new water on Earth; it’s all recycled and the technology has improved to the point now where the treatment systems are so effective that we can make the purest water in a more cost effective way,” Pedersen said.

Local water officials have already begun to apply for state and federal grants to build the Pure Water Project. They also plan to assemble a small-scale demonstration site on Las Virgenes Road to show ratepayers how the so-called toilet-to-tap system will work. Orange County Water District also uses an advanced water purification system for potable reuse. The agency’s processed sewer water is stored in an underground basin and used as a source of potable supply.