

A parched San Diego turns to the sewers

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SAN DIEGO — Acknowledging California's parched new reality, the city of San Diego has embraced a once-toxic idea: turning sewer water into drinking water.



Danny Bolton shows the difference between samples at a waste water treatment facility in Greenville, Miss. San Diego city council has voted unanimously to advance a \$ 2.5- billion US plan to recycle waste water, in a bid to battle the shortages gripping much of California.

The city's council voted unanimously Tuesday to advance a \$2.5-billion US plan to recycle waste water, the latest example of how California cities are looking for new supplies amid a severe drought.

Each of the nine council members effusively praised the effort before the vote as a way to make San Diego less dependent on imported water and insulated from drought.

"We're at the end of the pipeline," councilman Scott Sherman said. "We have a real problem getting water down here."

Such recycling, called toilet-to-tap by critics, has suffered an image problem that industry insiders call the yuck factor.

But San Diego, a city of 1.4 million people that imports 85 per cent of its water from the Colorado River and Northern California, has slowly warmed to the idea. A 2012 survey by the San Diego County Water Authority showed that nearly three of four residents favoured turning waste water into drinking water, a major shift from one in four in a 2005 survey.

“The drought puts a finer point on why this is so necessary,” Mayor Kevin Faulconer said. “Droughts are unfortunately a way of life in California, so we have to be prepared. This helps us to control our own destiny.”

The plan calls to initially recycle 57 million litres a day by 2023 and 314 million litres a day by 2035, about one-third of the city’s water supply. It enjoys broad support from business groups and environmental advocates.

The Orange County Water District, which serves 2.4 million people in California, plans to boost production of recycled water next year from 265 million litres a day to 379 million litres a day. It has reused waste water for drinking since 2008 through treatment that includes sending water through ground basins.

The Santa Clara Valley Water District, which serves 1.8 million people in the San Francisco Bay area, decided in September to pursue construction of facilities that it says could lead to turning waste water into drinking water for Sunnyvale and western Santa Clara County.

Still, it remains rare to turn sewage to drinking water. The WateReuse Association, a group of agencies behind the efforts, counts only 10 projects in the U. S., including El Paso, Texas, and Fairfax County, Virginia. Two Texas cities, Wichita Falls and Big Spring, started projects within the past two years.

On Tuesday, the San Diego council ratified an agreement between the mayor and four environmental groups — San Diego Coastkeeper, Surfrider Foundation, Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation and San Diego Audubon Society — to ask the Environmental Protection Agency for another reprieve and to commit to the recycled waste water plan. Unlike Orange County, San Diego plans to send water through a reservoir because it lacks groundwater basins.