



Committee on Natural Resources

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Water Recycling: A Drying Up Partnership

Water recycling is a proven water supply technology that is of tremendous value to communities suffering from drought or in need of a secure and reliable source of “new” water.

In the western U.S., the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation administers a federal program to research and provide financial assistance for water recycling projects. Despite the well-documented benefits of the water recycling program and its modest federal cost-share, this important program has been chronically underfunded.

There is a clear role for the federal government in supporting water recycling in the West, and the Administration should more aggressively help communities implement these valuable projects.

What is water recycling?

Water recycling is the treatment and management of municipal wastewater to produce non-potable (non-drinkable) water suitable for reuse. Recycled water can be used for irrigation of golf courses, parks, school grounds, business campuses, highway medians, and for groundwater recharge, wetlands development, and industrial purposes.

Proponents of recycling highlight that it allows communities to depend less on imported water (including water from federal dams and reservoirs), and costs less than conventional water storage projects (dams) or desalination of ocean water. Water recycling plants can also begin operating more quickly than dams and reservoir projects, and typically have minimal environmental impacts. Recycling supporters also note that even a small federal investment is helpful in leveraging construction funds from other sources, regardless of community size. Federal water recycling involvement can also help “drought-proof” areas, thus reducing the need for costly, emergency drought relief.

Why does the West need water recycling?

Developed water supplies are being strained in the U.S. as the result of a variety of circumstances, including a growing population, environmental mandates, and drought. Long-term projections in some states indicate that water demand will exceed existing water supplies unless new water sources are developed soon. Some view water

technologies, such as water recycling, as a primary means of developing new and reliable water supplies in water-stressed areas.

Federal role in water recycling

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) and the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) oversee water recycling projects. The EPA awards wastewater reclamation grants under broad statutes, such as the Safe Drinking Water Act, while Congress earmarks specific projects to the Corps. Reclamation is the only agency charged with carrying out a specific water recycling program. In 1992, Congress directed Reclamation to award federal grants to local water recycling projects under the Reclamation Wastewater and Groundwater Study and Facilities Act, also known as the Title XVI program.

This law authorized four full-scale water recycling construction projects, and directed Reclamation to identify and investigate cost-shared opportunities to reclaim and reuse agricultural, domestic, municipal, and industrial wastewater, as well as naturally impaired ground and surface waters through five specific feasibility studies.

Unlike traditional Reclamation water projects, water recycling projects require a majority of funds to be locally provided. The Act established a 50 percent federal cost-share for feasibility studies and limited the federal cost-share for construction of these projects to 25 percent. The Title XVI law also specified that none of the federal funds could be used for annual operation and maintenance costs of recycling. Those annual expenses fall to the local water districts or management agency.

Weak support from the Administration

The Congress and the Administration champion a larger water recycling role to help solve supply problems in our nation's fastest growing regions. Recycled water is crucial to ensuring an adequate water supply in the West and across America.

Chronic underfunding of the Reclamation program is detrimental to these popular and sensible projects. Further, the Administration has yet to support any of the water recycling bills passed by either this Congress or the last.

In effect, the Administration has shown a stubborn resistance to this forward-thinking, nationally beneficial water recycling program. Without the modest level of federal assistance provided by the water recycling program, some communities in the West will likely be forced to abandon their water recycling plans. This comes as a devastating blow to western communities that are suffering from severe and sustained drought, and are desperately looking for ways to stretch their ever-shrinking water supplies.