

NATION

Lack of support in D.C. hampers water recycling efforts

By Carolyn Lochhead

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Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

General manager Gary Darling, above the aeration tanks where the cleaning process begins at the Delta Diablo water district recycling plant, on Wed. September 2, 2015, in Antioch, Calif., where 13 million gallons of water is processed a day.

Water recycling may be one of the most promising sources of new water for California, but you'd never know it in Washington.

At half the cost of desalinating sea water, recycling municipal wastewater could create an estimated 1.1 million acre-feet of new water in California. That's roughly twice as much water as \$9 billion in new dam proposals would deliver to the state in a year.

The new reclaimed source would come from purifying water that currently is used once to take a shower or wash clothes or flush a toilet and then cleaned by a wastewater treatment plant and dumped in the ocean. Conservative Orange County is the technology's poster child.

Yet amid one of the worst droughts in California's modern history, the Obama administration this year asked Congress for \$20 million for water recycling, to be spread across the entire 17-state West. That's one-fifth the amount the administration targeted on livestock disaster assistance to California ranchers as part of its drought response, using funds under its discretion.

But tapping even that puddle of money is proving difficult because of a Republican ban on earmarks, which will allow no member of Congress to authorize spending on a new recycling project.

"You can't just say here's a project, fund it," said Matt Sparks, spokesman for House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Bakersfield. "That's an earmark, and that is exactly what we got rid of when we took the majority."



Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

Clean recycled water ready for distribution is collected in holding tanks at the Delta Diablo water district recycling plant, on Wed. September 2, 2015, in Antioch, Calif., where 13 million gallons of water a day is processed.

Under McCarthy's leadership, House Republicans this year passed a California drought bill that makes no mention of water recycling and contains no money for water projects. The legislation focuses instead on transferring existing water from Northern California to the San Joaquin Valley by overriding environmental regulations.

Gary Darling, general manager of Delta Diablo, an East Bay sewer district covering Antioch, Pittsburg and Bay Point, said California water districts have projects on the table that could deliver 100,000 acre-feet of new water per year reclaimed from existing supplies. That's substantially more total water than San Francisco uses in a year.

“Over half of our projects are shovel ready, they’ve got feasibility determinations and environmental clearances that are done, so we’re ready to go,” said Darling, who also represents the Western Recycled Water Coalition, a group of 24 water and sewer districts that has been trying to get more federal help. Without it the districts lack the funding to complete their projects.

Taken to new level

Water recycling has been around for decades, used mainly for landscaping or industrial purposes.

Water districts in Southern California took the technology to a whole new level when they sought a more secure water source after the state’s 1987-92 drought raised concerns that their access to water imported from Northern California would be curtailed. Led by Orange County, districts pioneered methods to turn raw sewage into tap water that is cleaner than many existing municipal systems deliver.

Such water “is essentially drought proof,” said UC Berkeley environmental engineer David Sedlak, co-director of Berkeley Water Center and a co-author of a National Research Council report on water recycling. Wastewater flows “don’t change much in a drought,” he said. People may cut back on watering their lawns, he said, but they still bathe and wash dishes and clothes, leaving a ready supply of water to recycle.



Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle
Plant operator, Doug Schreiner displays bottles of water before and after recycling at the Delta Diablo water district recycling plant, on Wed. September 2, 2015, in Antioch, Calif., where 13 million gallons of water a day is processed.

Relatively inexpensive

Reclaiming wastewater is not cheap, Sedlak said, “but it’s the least expensive of the next water supplies that California cities could develop.”

Water recycling can cost as much as \$1,000 an acre-foot, several times more than the river water delivered to cities through the federal and state water projects. But when supplies are short, it can be less costly than

imported water, which in the current drought has skyrocketed to \$1,700 and more an acre-foot on the open market. And recycling is about “half the price of seawater desalination and more reliable other water sources” such as buying water, Sedlak said.

Joe Grindstaff, general manager of the Inland Empire Utilities Agency, a water district serving nearly a million people in San Bernardino County, said his district recycles almost all the water it can after meeting its legal requirement to send a certain amount downstream.

“The whole region has become more self-sufficient, more resilient, and more focused on recycling,” Grindstaff said. “Our area’s probably as conservative as they come, and yet we’ve been engaged in trying to do everything we can to make sure we’re ready for the future.”

Many of the recycling projects that have been built or are under construction were financed in part with state bond money, and a big \$133 million chunk of federal money that former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a San Francisco Democrat, working with the Obama administration, added to the economic stimulus program in 2009.

Since then, congressional budget tightening has left little money for water investment of any kind.

Drought legislation by California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, both Democrats, targets \$200 million for water recycling to be used on 105 projects listed in separate legislation by Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Stockton, increasing by tenfold the money available now.

McNerney said the Bureau of Reclamation is spending what money it has, but because of the earmark ban, “there’s no way to get new projects on the list.” He said House Republicans “are just not interested. For one thing, recycling costs money, and if they find a way to ship more water through the delta then there’s really no money involved.”

Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, said recycling water is common sense. The way California’s water system now works is “water is taken from the Colorado River, from the Sacramento River, pumped 200, 300, 400 miles, cleaned, used once, cleaned again to a higher standard than the day it arrived, and then it’s dumped into the ocean,” he said.

The federal government, he said, spent “several billion dollars” on new water systems for Afghanistan. “We make choices around here,” he said.

Administration officials said they are doing all they can with the money that Congress gives them, and that it is up to Congress to authorize new projects.

The \$20 million the Obama administration is seeking for recycling resides in a Bureau of Reclamation program called Title 16. The Bureau will pay up to 25 percent of a new plant, and the local water agencies have to finance the rest.



Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

General manager Gary Darling, above giant augers that transport the dirty water to aeration tanks above to begin the cleaning process at the Delta Diablo water district recycling plant, on Wed. September 2, 2015, in Antioch, Calif., where 13 million gallons of water is processed every day.

‘Upward glide path’

Dan DuBray, the bureau’s public affairs chief, said the administration tripled the funding for the program upon taking office, in addition to providing the \$133 million for recycling in the stimulus. He said the administration also has shifted some of the \$50 million in western drought response money provided by Congress to the recycling program, bringing the total to \$26 million this year.

“Amid all the other programs getting pressured, flatlined and pushed down, between the Recovery Act and acceleration of funding, (water recycling) is really on an upward glide path,” DuBray said.

Still, the administration and Congress need to further increase the recycling budget, water managers said.

“In terms of water supply in the West,” said Inland Empire’s Grindstaff, “it would be more useful than a lot of other things they do.”

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