



COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES DEMOCRATS

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Water Recycling: A Drying Up Partnership April 2005

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

In the Western United States, the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation administers a Federal program of research and financial assistance for water recycling projects. Despite the well-documented benefits of the water recycling program and its modest Federal cost-share, funding for this important program was cut in the President’s budget.

There is a clear role for the Federal government in supporting water recycling in the West, and this Administration should more aggressively help communities that need the assistance to get these projects built.

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 lands, business campuses, and highway medians, and for groundwater recharge, wetlands development, and industrial purposes.

Proponents of recycling highlight that it provides communities less dependence 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 come on-line faster than a dam and reservoir project, and typically have minimal environmental impacts. Recycling supporters also note that even a small Federal investment is key in leveraging construction funds from other sources, regardless of community size, and that Federal water recycling involvement can 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 stressed in the United States 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) participate in water recycling projects. The EPA awards wastewater reclamation grants under broader statutes, such as the Safe Drinking Water Act, while Congress earmarks specific projects to the Corps. Only the Bureau of Reclamation, however, has been charged with carrying out a specific water recycling program. In 1992, Congress specifically 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 and naturally impaired ground and surface waters through five specific feasibility studies.

Unlike traditional Bureau of Reclamation water projects, these 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

In its budget request for Fiscal Year 2006, the Bureau of Reclamation is proposing to use funds only for completion of projects already under construction. The President’s FY 2006 budget request for the Title XVI projects is only \$10.2 million, a decrease of more than \$15.6 million below the enacted FY 2005 appropriation. The minimal funding request for this program is a concern because water recycling and reuse technologies should be receiving greater, not less, emphasis in meeting growing and changing demands for water in the Western states.

Reclamation should take a visionary and much larger water recycling role to help solve water supply problems in our nation. Recycled water is a critical component of the water supply picture in the West.

That the Administration continues to eliminate funding requests for these popular and sensible projects is unfortunate. Perhaps worse is the

fact that the Administration formally opposed every single bill introduced in the last Congress to authorize new water recycling projects.

In effect, the Administration has unilaterally decided to destroy the 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 are likely to be forced to abandon their plans for water recycling. This makes no sense when communities all over the Western United States are suffering from a severe and sustained drought and are desperately looking for help to stretch their water supplies.