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CONTACT:
Jennifer West
(916) 496-1470

60 Minutes: How a California Utility is Turning Sewer Water Into Purified Drinking Water

CBS News' 60 Minutes featured a segment Sunday that showed how the Orange County Water District transforms 96 million gallons a day of treated wastewater — including sewage — into purified drinking water. The segment ends with reporter Lesley Stahl taking a sip and declaring, "To tell the truth, it wasn't bad."

The 60 Minutes report on the Orange County Water District (OCWD) Groundwater Replenishment System detailed the multi-step process of transforming sewage water into safe, drinkable water. The wastewater is put through an elaborate three-step advanced-treatment process: microfiltration, reverse osmosis and ultra-violet light with hydrogen peroxide.

The OCWD operation, which was jointly funded by the Orange County Sanitation District, is one of a number of facilities in California turning sewer water into highly purified water that may eventually be used to supplement drinking water supplies. Currently, the OCWD water is not going straight to peoples' homes for drinking water. Instead it is being pumped into recharge basins where water filters through sand and gravel to replenish the deep aquifers of the local groundwater basin.

Several other California utilities are purifying sewer water, or are in the planning process, through what is known as potable reuse. Efforts are under way in the City of San Diego, Santa Clara Valley Water District, West Basin Municipal Water District, and Monterey County, in addition to several others.

"Potable reuse provides California with a safe, sustainable drinking water supply," said Jennifer West, Managing Director of WateReuse California. "Reusing

our water also protects our environment and can protect communities against drought.”

Reflecting the increased interest in potable reuse, in 2010 the Governor signed into law a bill mandating that an expert panel investigate the feasibility of developing regulatory criteria for direct potable reuse and to provide a final report on that investigation to the Legislature by the end of 2016.

The 60 Minutes report on the OCWD Groundwater Replenishment System can be viewed at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/drinkable-sewage-water/>

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