



WATER REUSE
CALIFORNIA

Communications
COLLABORATIVE GROUP

MEETING 1, OCTOBER 17, 2018, 9:30 A.M. TO 12:00 P.M.
DRAFT SUMMARY

Approximately 100 people participated either in-person or online in the first quarterly meeting of the Group. Following a welcome and introductions by Eleanor Torres, Orange County Water District and WaterReuse California Communications Collaborative Group (Group) Chair and Vice-Chair Melanie Mow-Schumacher, Soquel Creek Water District, Eleanor explained that the purpose of the Group is to provide a forum for communications and public affairs professionals to collaborate on potable reuse communications and learn from each other about successes and challenges.

Meeting materials are available on watereuse.org in the California section. The topics for the first meeting were selected based on responses to the initial survey. Future meeting topics will be selected both from the initial survey feedback as well as from the Group's discussions and follow up surveys.

The Good, The Bad, the Ugly (AKA Recent Media) – A summary of recent media dealing with potable reuse or other relevant recycled water articles was presented by Rupam Soni, Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. The articles have been generally positive and neutral, although “toilet to tap” is often used. Discussion ensued on whether it is possible to get the media to stop using “toilet to tap” and the best ways to communicate about potable reuse. Comments included:

- Media will insert links to the toilet regardless of how positive the story is.
- The phrase belittles the process and skips all the steps used to purify water.
- Often the article starts with “toilet to tap”, but is an otherwise good story – which leads to the question: is “toilet to tap” really a bad thing if it catches the reader’s attention and the story is good? |
- We need to focus on educating the editors who write the headlines.
- Another strategy might be to play off of the phrase and/or develop an infographic that shows the toilet and the tap, but also shows all the processes in between. OCWD’s GWRS memento bags include a statement “It’s not toilet to tap” and then graphically shows the purification process.
- Some say “all water is toilet to tap: “Drinking water for one agency out of a river comes from someone’s treated wastewater upstream” to help create the awareness that all types of water are just water.
- We should explore how other countries that have implemented potable reuse talked about their projects.

No conclusions were reached, but it is clear that this discussion needs to continue.

Focus Topic One: Terminology Matters: Eleanor Torres described a WateReuse Association effort to gain agreement on terminology among various associations, including ACWA, CASA and others. [Water Reuse Terminology](#) (June 2016) is the result of numerous discussions among many individuals and groups, including Patsy Tennyson and other members of WateReuse’s former Public Education and Outreach Committee. The goal was to ensure we are not confusing policy makers, the media and the public on what we are talking about. We also didn’t want to imply that one type of water was better than another, and we wanted to try to move away from “toilet to tap.” Dialogue about context is very important, as can be seen in the focus of the terminology document, which provides a general overview about reuse before having a discussion about specific recycled water uses:

- One size does not fit all
- There are multiple options for an agency to consider
- There are many different ways recycled water can be used
- Recycled water may not be suitable for all communities

We often see multiple terms even within the same document, which can be very confusing for the less familiar audience. The decision was to use “recycled” when talking about water for purple pipe projects. We all know the signs in California that state “Recycled Water – Do Not Drink” are required. This is often the only exposure community members have to recycled water – and they are being told not to drink it.

Likewise, if an agency wants to do a potable reuse project, they’d use “purified recycled water” or “advanced purified recycled water,” instead of just “recycled water,” to describe the water being produced. And for advanced purified water, we didn’t focus on an end-all process to produce that water (SAT, FAT, CAT, etc.), but rather we focused on the product, which has been proven to be “drinkable.” These are not just “feel good” words – they are based on lots of research done over many, many years.

And now for a commonly used word: “treatment” versus “purified.” “Treatment” should be used for non-potable recycled water since it is already used heavily on the wastewater side. When we just said “cleaned” instead, that got pushback from technical teams. For example, we thought the following made sense: “Water is cleaned at the wastewater treatment plant so it is clean enough to be discharged to the ocean or used for other purposes, or it can be cleaned even further and be used for drinking water.” But we still see the words “treated” or “treatment” a lot in technical materials even though communications professionals have been trying to change to “clean” or “cleaned.”

Patsy Tennyson provided the **history of the phrase “toilet to tap”**:

The following is based on the City of Los Angeles Historical Society article in a 2015 issue of their newsletter: In approximately 1993, the Upper San Gabriel Valley Water District and the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County proposed bringing recycled water from the San Jose Creek Water Reclamation Facility and percolating it into the Upper San Gabriel Basin. Miller Brewing has a facility along the 210 freeway that uses the Upper San Gabriel Basin groundwater to make their beer and were afraid that competitors would say they used “toilet water” to make their beer, so they began an opposition campaign and sued the Upper District to stop the project. Their public relations department coined the phrase “toilet to tap” to describe what the Upper District was proposing and newspapers in the area grabbed it and publicized it widely. At the same time, Dr. Forest Tennant waged a campaign against the project via a group he created, Citizens for Clean Water, and used his medical and political connections (and his money) to fight

the plan. Ultimately the Upper District did not go forward with the project after a lengthy battle. The phrase “toilet to tap” was brought to San Diego by a consumer affairs reporter who was doing a “sweeps week” story about San Diego’s Water Repurification Project – after visiting the Upper District, she developed a set with a toilet, a black box and a faucet, thus cementing the visual of “toilet to tap” into the minds of project opponents. Los Angeles’ Department of Water and Power’s East Valley Project was stopped after several months of operation when a political campaign began using “toilet to tap” to describe the project through newspaper stories. The phrase lives on more than 20 years later and several successful potable reuse projects since its creation in the mid-90s.

A brief discussion followed, including encouraging communications professionals to have a clear understanding of where this phrase came from -- certainly no one who wanted a potable reuse project to succeed would have come up with such a descriptor. Patsy does not think we’ll ever get rid of the phrase.

Can we replace “potable” with “drinkable”? Drinkable is more understandable to the layperson. People don’t know what “potable” means. Also, drinkable is a more trustable term. Comments and observations during discussion included:

- Agreement that most don’t know what “potable” means, and they certainly don’t know what potable reuse is. Preferable terms include “drinkable,” “drinking water,” and “safe to drink.”
- American Water Works Association doesn’t want utilities using “safe” because it has a legal meaning creating liability.
- Drinkable implies safe or consumable, which is slightly different than saying “drinking water.”
- It may create confusion in the minds of community members if you are putting the purified water in the ground if it is drinkable.
- For reservoir augmentation, San Diego uses “drinking water supply” since the water will go into their supply chain.
- DDW uses drinking water and potable water interchangeably, but “drinkable” is not used in the regulations and, thus, might raise issues
- The correct pronunciation for “potable,” according to plain talk, rhymes with “floatable.”
- It might be good if “purified water” is confused with bottled water because that industry has spent billions researching what to call this water in their marketing campaigns and determined “purified water” is successful.
- What about saying, “certified water” similar to the used car industry that now says “certified pre-owned vehicle”?

Can we get rid of “toilet to tap”? Discussion included:

- Say “toilet to purified to tap” or “toilet triple treated to tap,” which might be more accurate, but would still help the media attract readers. Or “pure water to tap.”
- There was agreement that we must talk to editors who write headlines because when reporters do research, they’ll see “toilet to tap.”
- Alternatively, we could say “Let’s talk about what this project really is” – or “toilet to tap” is so 90’s, or “There’s no new water on the planet, so we’ve all been drinking recycled water.”

- Even when it doesn't come up in an interview, more often than not the phrase appears in the article or headline, but at least now articles are more positive. You can start meetings with reporters by saying "You may have heard this called 'toilet to tap', but that is not at all what it is," which either results in their not using the phrase or explaining it more accurately.
- We should be proactive, not reactive, and we must neutralize emotions initially before responding. We don't need to be defensive.
- We can prepare op eds to change the narrative.
- One critical audience we need to survey about their feelings about potable reuse is utility or agency staff. Some have found staff to have less comfort with potable reuse when the agency is both a water and wastewater agency.
- Some promote the [Jack Black video](#) because people love "potty humor."
- Nextdoor.com and social media are difficult areas and may be a future agenda item. The CASA communication committee is talking about Nextdoor and how to address issues that arise there, so their findings and conclusions might be helpful to share at a future meeting.
- Having a public outreach committee composed of residents can smooth the path of correcting misinformation or providing accurate new information since the correction or new information is coming from neighbors and not utility staff.
- There are agencies that have already message-tested some of the terminology we're talking about, so it might be useful to collect that information and discuss it in this Group.
- We also need to talk about the project and its importance, as well as "belief vs. truth."
- Should we consider funding a statewide television commercial?

For a future meeting, we will consider a brainstorming session about ways to get rid of "Toilet to Tap."

Can we forego saying "indirect" and "direct," and just explain the water is drinkable/meets drinking water standards and is going to/into (fill in the blank)? For OCWD, they say "indirect" potable reuse first, and then can leave off the modifiers.

Patsy said that when the 13-02 project research was conducted, they found that people did not understand "indirect" and "direct." While we can explain it, the research project conclusion was to just say "potable reuse" without the modifiers.

Jennifer West (Managing Director, WateReuse CA) explained that WateReuse CA is looking to introduce legislation to get rid of these terms. She needs help demonstrating that there has been confusion created by "indirect" and "direct" potable reuse in order to justify the legislation. She asked any participants who have examples to please send them to her. Jennifer said these modifiers are a legal term rather than ways to help the public and are currently in statute, a situation WateReuse CA would like to change.

There will be a future survey of this Group to see if there is a consensus to only use "potable reuse."

The Group is asked to:

- Look at the terminology and see how your agency uses it. If the agency needs formal approval from its governing body to change the terminology, they should consider adopting those changes.
- Provide examples of confusion created from "indirect" and "direct" potable reuse to Jennifer West.

Focus Topic Two: Water Quality Monitoring and Testing: Communicating to Build Trust. Melanie Mow Schumacher and Rebecca Rubin (Soquel Water) showed some of the tables often used to demonstrate that the agency is conducting a thorough testing and monitoring program, but the tables are only good for people who want to drill down into details – they confuse everyone else. Rebecca then showed examples of graphics that have already been created to convey information about safety of recycled water and potable reuse, but these are still not the answer because what they all have in common is that they need explanation. The goal should be to provide a graphic that is easy to understand without a lot of context.

How can we better convey the safety of reuse water? Discussion included:

- Generally people are happy just to know that you're testing, regardless of what you're testing for, but testing could be communicated more simply.
- The [Global Water Connections Map](#) on [watereuse.org](#) is set up to provide a digital library, but we can ask WateReuse Association for more graphic treatments if these are not enough.
- Most agencies only send out their annual CCRs, which is not adequate for simple, graphic explanations.
- The CEC expert panel has some great reports and takeaways that could be compelling to the public, so maybe this Group could look at that including their information about safety of reuse water, especially since CECs are a particular concern of members of the public.
- Is it possible to identify and reach an agreement with a spokesperson, such as Jack Black (https://youtu.be/II_YIUDAv3c)? A brief discussion of potential spokespeople followed (Bill Nye, the Science Guy, for example, or a sports figure or other entertainer), as well as the notion that comedy might be the best form for breaking down walls. Others noted the importance of medical and health community support for potable reuse.
- Different agencies may need different spokespersons. For example, Wichita Falls managed to get medical people and professors from a local university to speak in a video to endorse their direct potable reuse project – but it also helped that they were running out of water and people could see the lake levels going down. National WateReuse now has a [committee](#) that is trying to address the need for medical/health community spokespeople at the national level.
- Survey results show the public has a lot of trust in public health officials, but now nobody knows who Division of Drinking Water (DDW) is, even though the oversight and regulations are still there.
- It is important to consider what can happen if the chosen spokesperson gets into trouble. (i.e. Bill Cosby or legislators who champion and then have problems). The medical community has been very difficult to reach, but OCWD has developed strong relationships with local nursing programs that now include a tour of the facility as a requirement for their program. They were able to secure letters of support about how safe the water is.
- Irvine Ranch Water District produced a [video](#) following water throughout the day that shows the treatment processes and the many great employees that are working to produce safe water.
- The San Diego County Water Authority has produced one [video](#) on the purification process and two videos (one in English and one in Spanish) that are very relatable and can be found at [potablereuse.sdcwa.org](#).

Water Reuse Communication Tools: Patsy Tennyson shared some of the many communication tools available to WateReuse members on [watereuse.org](#). Many agencies are using animation to help tell the

potable reuse story. She hopes that this Group will foster collaboration and cooperation among agencies and that members will be able to call upon each other for ideas and information. To that end, she showed a map of existing and planned potable reuse projects throughout the United States. (This is in [EPA's Potable Reuse Compendium](#); released in January 2018.) Jennifer West also said there is a [map](#) of projects in California on the WateReuse webpage (in the California section).

***If an agency is not already a member of [WateReuse Association](#), they should consider joining.

Legislation Highlights: The purpose of this agenda item is to raise awareness about what WateReuse CA does with regard to legislation and ensure Group members know that there is a Leg/Reg Committee that meets regularly to discuss legislation. The objective here is to make sure communication professionals are aware of this committee since what is happening legislatively or in regulations can often have an impact on communication.

Jennifer West (Managing Director, WateReuse CA) provided an update of current legislative and regulatory activities:

- For California, we are working on taking “indirect” and “direct” out of statutory language. This is a follow up to AB574, which passed two years ago and defines several potable reuse terms. For example, we used to say “surface water augmentation,” but this was changed to “reservoir augmentation,” and we now have “raw water augmentation” and “treated drinking water augmentation.”
- We’re also going to look at a bill updating regulations for purple pipe projects.
- Prop 3 included \$400M for potable reuse projects. Funding would go to the water board.
- Speculative issues include a discussion of NGO groups that are trying to get the same leak loss requirements for drinking water pipes and recycled water pipes; prohibiting wastewater discharges into oceans and bays, etc. There is a concern with how these new laws are written, as well as with feasibility and cost, and these issues can become a topic of discussion/communication.
- AB2017 didn’t go forward last year, but may go forward to create specific CEC regulations for DDW.
- A major regulatory item that we can update on at the next meeting deals with monitoring for bioassays. Currently it includes regulatory requirements and consequences for failure to comply, but there is no standardization of bioassay tests yet. We are going to need to discuss how to talk about bioassays – and later, how to deal with test results that have not been standardized.

Discussion included:

- Are groups trying to stop brine discharges to the ocean/bay? Jennifer said that groups generally understand that R/O produces a brine discharge and are recognizing this. But there are NGOs who’ve pushed stopping wastewater discharges to oceans and bays. WateReuse CA doesn’t want to see a blanket mandate in the code that doesn’t address nuances.
- How can Group members find out if they have a member on the legislative/regulatory committee? Jennifer will provide a matrix of who participates. There are 16 members and some issues go to vote. There is a very large list of interested parties who follow the committee action and discussion.

- Are there any comments on the passage of SB966? Jennifer said this legislation would require onsite reuse and is sponsored by SFPUC. WaterReuse CA expects it will be signed into law, and also noted that the national organization has been especially focused on this.

Roundtable – Project Updates and Challenges:

- OCWD was recently contacted about antibiotic resistant bacteria in reuse water. The person submitting the question has popped up in many places over the years, and now OCWD is working to address the concerns raised in the inquiry.
- Las Virgenes MWD has plans to build a demonstration potable reuse plant in the next year. One of their cities has been vocal against constructing the demonstration facility because it will cost more than \$2 million to build and suggests moving directly to a full-scale project to be on line by 2030. The District has advocated a demonstration facility is necessary for training, testing and public outreach purposes.

Future Meetings: The Group will meet quarterly. Everyone will be notified once the January date and location are finalized.

The top three topics of interest in the initial survey were:

- Terminology that is clear to the public
- Emerging issues that could impact trust
- Best practices in messaging

This is a collaboration so it is important to hear from Group members about topics of interest. We will survey the Group to gather more information.

For the next meeting, the planning committee will look at issues raised today including:

- Developing an alternative to “toilet to tap”
- CECs and how to talk about them in an easy to understand way
- Best practices at other utilities, social media use including Nextdoor, etc.
- Case study presentation by one of the Group members