

Recycled water safe, essential, officials say

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Proposed legislation to ban the use of water reclaimed from sewage for irrigating vegetable fields is premature and could deal a serious blow to the state's agricultural industry and its water supply, according to Monterey County officials.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, a former chairman of the Assembly Agricultural Committee, has called for laws governing crops and packaging that would ban the use of reclaimed sewage water in organic vegetable crops and possibly nonorganic crops.

His proposal comes on the heels of reports of E. coli-contaminated spinach in the Salinas Valley.

Adrienne Dominguez, an aide to Florez, said details of the proposed legislation have not been drawn up but may be drafted by December for consideration in the coming year.

Florez's announcement generated an immediate response from local officials. Much of the irrigation water used on crops on the west end of the Salinas Valley has been reclaimed from sewage.

"There is absolutely no basis" for believing reclaimed water is unsafe, said Keith Israel, general manager of the Monterey Regional Water Pollution Control Agency. "It's not going to be recycled water having anything to do with the spinach. We just have too good a history. There has never been a problem with recycled water in the 30 or 40 years it's been used."

Reclaimed water "is so much cleaner than a lot of other water sources," he said, "I can't think of any reason not to use it. Growers like the fact that it's tested so much. There's a lot of confidence that this water's always going to be good."

The agency provides 13,000 acre-feet a year of irrigation water for farm and landscaping use, Israel said -- "a drop in the bucket" compared with overall agricultural irrigation in the county from wells and reservoirs.

In an area where more dams can't be built and imported water is unavailable, he said, recycled water is necessary.

Another alternative is desalinated water, which Israel described as expensive, using a lot of energy and coming with unresolved environmental issues.

"We just can't afford to use water once and throw it away," he said. "There's no reason not to clean it up and use it again. Our growers understand water, and they're the toughest critics. There have been more problems with potable water."

Reclaiming water is part of state water policy, said Bob Perkins, executive director of the Monterey County Farm Bureau.

"We need more water in California, and one of the easiest ways to stretch or expand it is to reclaim it from urban sources and recycle it for agriculture," Perkins said.

Florez's proposed ban, he said, "would undermine any plans to expand the water supply."

And, Perkins said, "it is premature to propose legislative solutions before we know what the problem is."

Reclaimed water has been used successfully for years, and "there is absolutely no indication it has anything to do with this outbreak or any other food safety concern," he said.

Perkins added that he hopes state and federal legislators will vote to fund intensive, focused research on the E. coli problem.

A ban on recycled irrigation water would affect agriculture statewide and reclamation projects already in the works, including the Castroville water reclamation project, said Curtis Weeks, general manager of the Monterey County Water Resources Agency.

"We're not clear what his (Florez's) objectives or objections are," Weeks said.

The Association of California Water Agencies, he said, is not in favor of any broad, sweeping legislation banning reclaimed water.

The county is embracing the use of recycled water, Weeks said, and its quality is "excellent" -- higher than state requirements and comparable to drinking water.

The agency has been operating a recycling project since 1998. It is monitored continuously, and there have been no food safety related issues in those years and "no contamination events involving recycled water in any part of California, ever," said Weeks.

The E. coli issue has given politicians an opportunity for posturing, Weeks said. "Unfortunately, I think, people are jumping on all kinds of bandwagons."

There is no documented evidence, he added, that crop plants are able to take in pathogens through their roots, and any E. coli contamination probably comes from matter that is splashed or spilled on the surface of the plant, not up through the ground.