

GETTING TO THE TRUTH WHILE GAINING TRUST: WHAT THE PUBLIC *REALLY* THINKS ABOUT RECYCLED WATER

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Introduction

Insights gained from recent one-on-one interviews in three California cities

In the past year, the Data Instincts public information strategy team had the opportunity to interview more than 150 members of the public from three very different California communities that were in various phases of their recycled water projects. An in-depth interview process was used to gather information from potential recycled water customers and, in some cases, members of the general public, to help formulate communications and public information strategies for projects in Redwood City, Clovis and Santa Rosa.

Redwood City

Redwood City, located in the heart of the San Francisco Bay Area, is home to more than 75,000 residents and numerous high-tech leaders such as Oracle Corporation and Electronic Arts. An expansion of their recycled water project was just getting under way when our interviews of potential users and residents took place. Some city landscaping near the treatment facility was already being irrigated with recycled water, the treatment plant itself was in the beginning stages of necessary upgrades and design plans for installing purple pipes were being developed for areas of town earmarked for recycled water usage. These areas included residential, commercial and industrial facilities. In the months before interviewing began there had been an outcry from a small faction of area homeowners about recycled water safety, specifically concerns about the potential presence of and health risks associated with cryptosporidium and Giardia. In response, a Community Task Force recommended, and the city council agreed, not to apply recycled water to parks, schools or other places where children play.

Clovis

Situated in the midst of California's agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley, the fast growing city of Clovis boasts a population of 86,000 and has been known as the "Gateway to the Sierra" since its incorporation in 1912. In order to facilitate a recycled water project, the city not only needed to identify potential users and lay pipe, but also build the town's first wastewater treatment plant because, for years, the neighboring community of Fresno collected and treated Clovis' sewage. By the time we interviewed selected residents and potential users, the city had already faced some controversy about the location of the proposed treatment plant – in an unincorporated area where many residents relied on groundwater for drinking and irrigation purposes. Area residents were concerned not only about the visual and sensory impacts the plant may have on them or their property values, they also feared the possibility of "sewage" tainting their groundwater supplies and did not welcome the encroachment of the town on their rural surroundings.

Santa Rosa

Santa Rosa is located about 50 miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge, in Sonoma County Wine Country, just minutes away from the ocean, the redwoods and over 100 wineries.

The city itself has a population of over 150,000 but, because it serves three additional cities, the Santa Rosa Subregional Water Reuse System has more than 225,000 system users. In addition to the Geysers Recharge Project, which pumps 11 MGD of recycled water high into the mountains where it is injected into steamfields to generate electricity, the Subregional System also uses recycled water to irrigate a combination of agricultural and urban areas amounting to over 6,400 acres of land, including vineyards, golf courses, and parks. However, as a means of conserving more potable water and further reducing treated wastewater discharges into local waterways, Santa Rosa is exploring the expansion of their urban reuse program; our interviews of potential recycled water users was an early element of that exploration process.

The purpose and objectives for each of the three information-gathering projects were essentially the same: *To gather input from various potentially affected community audiences in order to shape the best informational approach to meet the needs of these constituents.* In Redwood City and Clovis, potential users and members of the general public were interviewed. In Santa Rosa, only potential users were included in the interview process.

The interview process also served as a way to introduce the idea of using recycled water to the person or organization engaged. It allowed for a free exchange of information and concerns without any sense of urgency toward making a decision to use or not use recycled water. Most of those interviewed developed an actionable desire to use recycled water. Because of the informal atmosphere, this occurred naturally without the use of traditional sales techniques.

After completing the interviews in those three communities, the public involvement strategy team recognized that, though some findings were area specific, there was an overall commonality in attitudes, perceptions and concerns about recycled water usage across all the communities.

Getting to the Truth While Gaining Trust: The In-Depth Interview Process

Before delving into the specific findings, we will describe the interview technique that was used and why it is an excellent approach for large scale, potentially controversial public works projects.

For all respondents, the in-depth interview methodology (IDI) was employed using discussion guides developed to standardize the interview process. Interviews were conducted in person whenever possible, though a few occurred over the telephone.

Though most questions were common to all interviewees, some were specific to user types, such as developers, schools, industrial users or those who would not be using the water but might be impacted in other ways.

Based on our experience, the in-depth interview technique (versus focus group or survey approaches) has proven itself to be the most appropriate and useful method for exploring sensitive and/or politically charged issues, such as recycled water usage, because:

- It keeps the discussion focused and eliminates bandwagoning or “group think” effects, which are detrimental to free and open exchanges that lead to deeper insights into and understanding of the people and issues involved, and

- It allows the interviewing team to put a “face” on the project, gain trust, build relationships and “educate” interviewees about project specifics in addition to gathering insights from them.

In this process, participants are generally randomly selected from a list or lists provided by the city. They are contacted by telephone (or sometimes email) and appointments are set at times and locations convenient to the interviewees. Inclusion on the list can be based on one or more of the following criteria:

- High usage water customers (based on utility billing records)
- Proximity to existing facilities or planned projects
- Planned development/Developers
- Residents of affected areas (construction or potential users)
- Members of related citizen or community groups
- Members of related professional organizations
- Citizens who frequent or speak out about project in council meetings
- Management/Board Members of potentially affected HOAs

Though called a one-on-one approach, generally at least two interviewers conduct the session, one as the primary interviewer the other as the primary note taker. Occasionally more than one interviewee will attend a session; particularly in businesses where there may be several people and/or departments involved in the decision-making process.

The standardized discussion guide allows answers to some questions to be quantified, but it should be noted that because of the study sample size and recruitment techniques employed, the findings of these one-on-one interviews are directional and not necessarily scientific or statistically applicable to a larger population.

What the Public Really Thinks About Recycled Water

General Findings

Respondents were asked how much they knew about their area’s recycled water project. Not surprisingly, in cities that had earlier issues or controversies surrounding the projects, respondents were far more inclined to believe they knew a lot, or at least something, about the project in their city. And, probably due to certain selection criteria, many these respondents reported getting most of their information from the city (council members, staff or utilities department), with the newspaper coming in as the second most cited information resource, and the recycled water project team a distant third.

Though early in the interviews two-thirds of respondents reported that they had little or no initial concerns about the project, many issues later surfaced for most. Among potential users and the general public, areas of concern included:

- Water quality in relation to public safety (especially children)
- Odors produced during irrigation
- Health and environmental effects of pathogens and pharmaceuticals
- Potential of cross connection incidents occurring
- Tainted potable water supplies (particularly groundwater)
- Potential risks to household pets, birds and wildlife

- Project costs and who is going to pay
- Traffic disruptions during construction

That said, nearly everyone we spoke to (92%) believed using recycled water for landscape irrigation would have an overall positive effect on his or her community. Those who clarified most often cited environmental benefits and/or potable water offsets (conservation) as the two biggest plusses for using recycled water for irrigation.

Nearly all those interviewed were interested in receiving project updates and 85% mentioned email as a preferred communications platform. Running a distant second, traditional mail garnered 21% of the mentions.

Potential Users

Only about half of potential users were initially aware of the possible cost savings associated with using recycled water for landscape irrigation or industrial purposes. However, some thought the water should either be free or deeply discounted. Others said any cost savings would be beneficial to them and the potential savings definitely heightened their interest in using recycled water.

About half of commercial business representatives felt that the usage of recycled water for landscape irrigation would have little or no effect on their employees or customers. However, many did want assurances that there would be no negative health impacts on employees, particularly those who would have direct contact with the water. Nearly all believed that training sessions in recycled water usage would be very helpful to their organizations.

Overall, the concerns expressed by potential irrigation and industrial users generally fell into one of the following categories:

FINANCIAL

- What will be our costs; return on investment; break-even point; savings?
- Who pays for the expense of retrofitting?
- Who is liable for water related incidents that may occur?

CONSTRUCTION

- How involved will the retrofit be?
- Do all pipes need to be replaced with purple ones?
- How will project and retrofit construction activities impact our business?
- What is the project timeline?

WATER QUALITY

- How safe is the water for employees and customers?
- Will the water smell bad?
- What is the bacterial content of the water?
- How will the water affect our landscaping and/or equipment?
- How will the public perceive usage of recycled water?
- Will the city be supplying educational brochures about the project and recycled water quality?

Homeowners Associations and public entities, such as schools, had many more concerns about public reaction to the use of recycled water for irrigation. While many of these representatives felt personally confident about the safety of recycled water for irrigation, nearly all expressed concerns about public perception and backlash. HOAs worried about homeowner perceptions and

property values; schools expressed concerns about parental and student reaction. All felt that educational meetings and outreach materials would be useful in gaining public acceptance.

Though most were interested in the water only for irrigation, some potential users were interested in recycled water for industrial purposes including:

- Cooling towers
- Washing equipment and vehicles
- Fire suppression
- Dust control
- Manufacturing processes

Only about a quarter of potential industrial users had current drawings or schematics of their water systems and only a few more knew how much water they use for the process in question. Potential landscape users fared a bit better, with just over half saying they had drawings or schematics of their irrigation systems.

Recommendations

It is clear that, in theory, most people recognize the benefits and are ready to accept the usage of recycled water for landscape irrigation. In practice, however, when the purple pipes start showing up in their parks and neighborhoods, concerns and even fear can quickly take over.

The one-on-one interviewing approach, especially in the earliest stages of a recycled water project, offers many benefits – the most important being that it provides an opportunity for the project team and community leaders to begin building relationships and gaining trust with challenging project opponents. Establishing trust in implementing recycled water projects has been cited as a critical component for success in several studies from Australia to Florida. You must listen to your constituents to learn what they truly think and you must educate them about recycled water and the details of your particular project.

The in-depth interviews can help shape policy and the message and communications program for your recycled water project. Every project's public outreach and communications should, at minimum, include:

- Establishment of project talking points to get community and project leaders unified with the same outgoing message
- A series of Open House meetings in areas and neighborhoods and at public facilities (such as schools) that will be affected by the project (during construction, as potential water users, or both)
- A Web site and printed materials with detailed project information for the public, including a Frequently Asked Questions section
- Permission-based broadcast emails to update interested constituents about the project
- Education, education and more education

So, What Happened?

In each of the three cities, the one-on-one interviews influenced policy in many ways as the projects moved forward. The following highlights just a few of the insights and decisions that were based on the in-depth interview findings.

Redwood City

As a result of the interviews conducted, the project team consciously determined to focus first on soliciting recycled water customers from the commercial and industrial sectors before approaching potential residential customers. This was accepted as a fair approach by project opponents and allowed them to support the project team's efforts.

Clovis

A simple idea emerged as a winner early in the interview process. Local school district leaders asked if they could speak with school administrators and teachers from facilities in other communities that currently use recycled water. From this a plan was made to invite administrators and teachers who already had years of experience with recycled water on their campus landscapes to future school community meetings where they could address the questions of parents and teachers at this new potential recycle water site. We continue to use the same idea in other communities, with farmers talking to farmers, and HOAs managers speaking with HOA managers from other cities. Who best to alleviate fears about recycled water usage than their counterparts who have gone before them?

Santa Rosa

Results from interviews highlighted locations where people wanted recycled water. Unfortunately, one of the areas appeared to be too expensive to include on future pipeline expansions. What emerged was a potential offset opportunity from a commercially run facility that could potentially share their recycled water with neighbors in their immediate area. The neighbors include a golf course and several commercial landscape sites. This would help meet an overall goal of improving regional water supply through offset usage of recycled water. This project is still in early planning stages so final conveyance systems are yet to be finalized, but this and similar opportunities were unknown before the interview process occurred.