water-wise solution

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"Water, water, water ... There is no shortage of water in the desert but exactly the right amount ... unless you try to establish a city where no city should be."

—**Edward Abbey,** *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*

With constant demands on water resources, reclaimed water has become an important part of our water supply to meet existing and future needs.

Typical applications, depending on the level of treatment, include anything from landscape irrigation, industrial cooling processes, toilet flushing, vehicle washing, agriculture, to groundwater or surface water recharge for drinking water supplies augmentation.

By offsetting demand for groundwater and surface water, this alternative, nontraditional water source reduces stress on the environment, offers economic benefits by delaying costly water system expansions, and eliminates the need to discharge wastewater effluent to surface waters.

In 1912, the first small urban reuse system was born with the irrigation of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Fast-forward 100 years, and you will find numerous examples of communities that rely on highly treated reclaimed water.

Tucson Water, for example, has been producing and delivering reclaimed water for irrigation and other non-drinking water uses for more than 27 years, saving billions of gallons of drinking water annually.

Beyond Arizona, Texas and California, the state of Florida has successfully taken advantage of reclaimed water practices by maintaining more than 440 systems that reclaim 659 million gal of water per day, according to the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

Has wastewater treatment technology advanced to the point where Abbey's words quoted above no longer ring true? Perhaps ... But maybe regions beyond the desert Southwest should take a closer look at reclaimed water.

The time is certainly right. This summer, persistent drought has affected most of the country. According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, more than 63% of the continental U.S. is experiencing moderate to exceptional drought, and half of all counties have been declared disaster areas. The severe drought has wreaked havoc on soybean and corn crops, causing grain prices to jump sharply since mid-June. Reclaimed water use for irrigation and agriculture, however, is relatively new to the Midwest, which typically is blessed with abundant water resources. This blessing is also a curse, as abundant resources make it difficult for municipalities, environmental coalitions and water utilities to sway public attitudes toward reclaimed water use and effective conservation practices.

While reclamed water use is growing faster in communities that face limited water supplies, I believe that climate change, population growth and technology advancements will continue to shift public opinion in favor of recycling and reuse beyond the desert landscapes.

It won't be long before reclaimed water is no longer viewed as a nontraditional "yuck" resource, but as a practical, drought-proof and growth-enabling water-wise solution.

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