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SR may force use of wastewater

Council to weigh law requiring new developments, some businesses to utilize effluent

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Santa Rosa finally may have found the way to get rid of unwanted wastewater: Adopt a law to force people to take it.

"If it's a new business park, a new cement-mixing plant or a commercial car wash, the city would have the authority to require them to use recycled water rather than potable water," said Virginia Porter, a consultant who helped the city draft the new law.

It could include commercial laundries that specifically deal with washing everything from uniforms and linens to diapers and tablecloths, Porter said.

The City Council on Tuesday will consider the ordinance, which would empower the city to require selected residential, commercial and industrial developments to use the city's highly treated effluent -- in place of potable water -- for nonhuman and animal consumption uses.

Santa Rosa Water Resources Planner Jennifer Burke said the goal is simple: to conserve potable water.

Porter said the requirements are in keeping with state laws and policies that increasingly demand that wastewater, particularly the highly treated variety Santa Rosa produces, be used in place of drinking-quality water whenever possible.

The measure goes to the council with a favorable recommendation from the city's

Board of Public Utilities.

If adopted Tuesday, the law would go into effect Oct. 19, although board Chairman Richard Dowd said it would be some time, potentially a year or more, before details of how it will be implemented are decided.

Opposition is expected Tuesday. During a board meeting Thursday, some citizens raised health concerns about the effluent, particularly if it's to be used to irrigate landscaping around homes.

Board members, however, said the use of wastewater would not go forward if scientific evidence emerges that it is harmful. But so far the city hasn't seen that evidence nor has the state provided it.

"Santa Rosa's wastewater is virtually at drinking water standards," said Porter, who noted that under state water quality standards it legally can be used to fill a swimming pool.

"It's OK for full body contact but not drinking. It's good stuff," she said.

Dowd said without the law it is unlikely the city can find many takers within the fast-growing southwest and southeast portions of the city, which are the primary focus of the measure.

The board has been developing plans for two years to find ways to put a billion gallons of effluent a year to productive use in those two areas, which are targeted for the major share of city growth over the next 10 to 20 years.

Currently, most of the 8 billion gallons a year of wastewater generated by the city's regional sewage treatment plant is used to irrigate 6,400 acres of farmland and urban landscapes between Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park or is piped to The Geysers steam fields to produce steam and electricity.

But future growth, particularly in Santa Rosa's southwest and southeast areas, will produce substantially more wastewater.

Dowd said the initial plan is to target larger users first. "We want to identify where its use would be most efficient," he said.

"The game plan is to identify those who use a million gallons of water or more a year, not Joe and Mary Sixpack with a 5,000-square-foot lot," he said.

Dowd said that without the new law residents and business owners in those areas would be reluctant to substitute wastewater for potable water even for the best of conservation reasons.

"If we don't make it mandatory for new development, it will never happen," he said.

He also said that successful implementation would delay the need for costly projects by the Sonoma County Water Agency to bolster municipal water supplies to Santa Rosa and a half-dozen other cities it serves.

For those forced to take the wastewater, Dowd said it would result in slightly lower monthly bills. The utilities board is recommending the effluent be priced 5 percent below what the city charges for potable water.

Porter said wastewater already has become a widely accepted commodity. It currently is used to irrigate the front and back yards of a subdivision of Windsor homes and at nearly every school, park and golf course in Rohnert Park.

"Wastewater," Burke said, "is drought-proof and sustainable."

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