

Your Watershed: Recycled Water – A Good Thing for Our Region

by the Russian River Watershed Association

Our water supply is a limited resource that is shared by many. Much has been written this past year of the need to reduce summertime water use in Sonoma and Mendocino counties to help preserve water supply for the fall run of endangered salmonid species in the Russian River. With the growing pressures to provide water for human uses, aquatic life, and the environment, it is good to know that many cities in Sonoma and Mendocino Counties have the ability to provide recycled water for non-potable purposes, saving precious potable water for appropriate purposes.

Recycled water is wastewater that is cleaned through a very stringent four-step treatment process to produce high-quality, tertiary-treated water that is safe for the irrigation of landscapes, agricultural crops, vegetable crops that are eaten raw, vineyards, playgrounds, golf courses, parks, cemeteries, freeway embankments, and street medians. It is also frequently used in industrial processes, decorative fountains, fire suppression systems and much more. Recycled water is one of the most highly regulated water sources in the nation and must meet strict standards for health and safety as set by the California Department of Public Health for beneficial non-potable uses.

Recently, you may have heard about trace amounts of pharmaceuticals and “hormone-mimicking” chemical compounds that are not completely removed during the recycled water treatment process. We find these microconstituents in our water and our environment because we use medicinal drugs, personal care products such as perfume and shampoo, and other products such as pesticides and plastic bottles. Additionally, many plants, including some food crops, produce hormone-mimicking compounds, such as the phytoestrogens in soy products. Human exposure to these compounds from food, air and pharmaceutical products is much greater than from water.

Water quality regulators, member agencies of the Russian River Watershed Association and the water reuse industry are aware of these trace microconstituents that are of emerging interest and concern, and take this concern very seriously, conducting a great deal of research and developing programs to help prevent pharmaceuticals from entering our waterways. You can help by properly disposing of your unused drugs at the Sonoma County Waste Management Agency’s Household Toxics Facility or the Mendocino Solid Waste Management Authority’s HazMobile. The Russian River Watershed Association and its member agencies are also working on ways to make it easier for you to properly dispose of pharmaceuticals through Drug Take Back Programs that are soon to be introduced around the County. If you are unfamiliar with pharmaceutical disposal programs, please visit www.NoDrugsDownTheDrain.com.

Recycled water is continuously tested, monitored and regulated to ensure the water quality far exceeds its intended use. Nationwide, recycled water is used in thousands of locations and has been used for irrigation purposes in the Russian River watershed for over 30 years. In the thousands of applications throughout the U.S., there has never been a documented illness from recycled water use.

Recycled water is a local, reliable water supply that offsets the need for developing new water supply sources and preserves our limited potable water supply for humans and the environment. Nature has recycled the planet's finite water supply for billions of years. By duplicating much of nature's process, we produce a sustainable water supply that can be used for many beneficial, non-potable purposes. We live in a semi-arid region with scarce water supplies and it is our responsibility to take advantage of the many valuable uses of recycled water.

The Russian River Watershed Association (www.rrwatershed.org) is an association of nine cities, counties and special districts in the watershed that are working together on programs for clean water, fisheries restoration and watershed enhancement.