

GUEST VIEW: Water reuse in Texas

by Texas State Rep. Bill Callegari | Posted: Monday, September 8, 2014 5:00 am

Water reuse has had an unfair introduction to Texas and the rest of America. Media stories covering this water supply strategy use the hook of "from toilet to tap," suggesting that households are drinking and bathing in their own sewage. While some may be concerned by this negative connotation, in truth water reuse serves as a positive and necessary strategy for providing future water supplies.

The technology exists to clean, recycle, and reuse our water resources. Given this ability, water reuse offers to build on the longstanding premise within Texas law that the water within our rivers, lakes, and aquifers be withdrawn for beneficial purposes — for use within our homes, farms, and industry.

Applied appropriately, and respecting state and federal clean and drinking water standards, water reuse wrings that extra drop of benefit from our water resources by extending and maximizing their use. The more water reused, the less that may be required from Texas rivers, lakes, and aquifers. This water supply strategy is gaining prominence as our water resources strain under the challenges of drought and population growth.

Already, many Texas communities are pursuing water reuse as a way to drought-proof and diversify their water supply portfolios. Wichita Falls and Big Spring garnered national attention for their direct potable reuse projects. In both cities wastewater is cleaned, treated and made available for household use.

Austin, San Antonio, and the Tarrant Regional Water District also have reuse programs for beneficial purposes. Near Houston, both the North Fort Bend and West Harris County regional water authorities — which I helped create by legislation — offer incentives for water districts to implement water reuse projects. Other water districts in the Houston area are also pursuing this strategy.

Water reuse is undergoing a rapid embrace in West Texas, particularly within the Permian and Eagle Ford shale plays, where water resources are scarce. Earlier this summer, one company reached an agreement to purchase treated wastewater from Odessa for drilling purposes. Meanwhile, the industry is exploring ways to recycle the water used in fracking operations.

Given the emergence of water reuse in Texas, the Legislature and our water agencies can do more to promote its development. As an example, the Railroad Commission adopted a rule in 2013 providing more flexibility for exploration companies to recycle the wastewater generated by fracking operations.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) has rules for the beneficial indirect reuse of reclaimed water for municipal and industrial purposes. To the agency's credit, TCEQ displayed

outstanding initiative by working closely with the cities of Wichita Falls and Big Spring to approve their needed reuse projects.

Still, some TCEQ rules could be revisited to better encourage water reuse. One in particular, which bars treated effluent from the Colorado River's Highland Lakes, should be revised to allow water to be discharged and reused within that drought-stressed basin.

The Legislature, too, should keep water reuse in its sights. Last session, the Legislature rightfully established funding incentives within our newly-created water fund for water reuse and conservation projects.

Still, there is plenty of envelope to be pushed. In sessions past, I authored legislation creating a severance tax credit for oil and gas companies that reuse water used for exploration purposes. While that bill did not pass, the time is ripe to reconsider the concept.

More broadly, the Legislature should consider establishing a formal policy to encourage water reuse.

This does not mean Texas needs heavy-handed, bureaucratically-driven mandates and targets. As an alternative, and recognizing water reuse as a beneficial use of our resources, the policies adopted should be aimed toward encouraging and incentivizing the deployment of water reuse strategies. The Legislature should also work with TCEQ to remove regulatory roadblocks in state law that impede water reuse.

Soon, and with the help of our state's leadership, stories on water reuse projects will be more about the ribbon cutting, and less about where the water came from.

Representative Callegari represents the Katy and the west Harris County area.