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Mandatory recycled water use approved

The El Dorado district adopts the policy to demonstrate its commitment to conservation.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published April 22, 2004*)

To assure continued demand for recycled water and demonstrate a commitment to conserve water resources, the El Dorado Irrigation District has adopted a policy requiring use of recycled water where feasible.

The policy, at present, primarily will affect developments in El Dorado Hills, which can be served with recycled water from the district's El Dorado Hills and Deer Creek wastewater treatment plants.

The district board, with the support of major El Dorado Hills developers, approved the mandatory use policy Monday. The decision followed several months of workshops during which developers and some district directors questioned whether such a mandate was necessary.

Director George Osborne, noting that he had initiated the discussions several months ago, stressed that in securing additional water supplies it is important to demonstrate to state and federal water authorities "that we are husbanding our water to the best of our ability. It would be a whole lot easier and cheaper just to use potable water."

The ease and relative economy of using potable, or drinkable, water rather than recycled water was one reason a mandatory use policy was necessary, district staff members said.

In 1999, developers of the Serrano community in El Dorado Hills pioneered the use of water from the district's wastewater treatment plants for residential landscaping. Homes in the development are equipped with two sets of pipes - purple ones for delivering recycled water for outdoor irrigation and another set for water for household use.

Using recycled water allowed Serrano to stretch its drinking water supply and build twice as many houses as it would have been allowed to.

Now that the El Dorado Irrigation District has access to 17,000 more acre-feet of water through its Project 184 - a system of lakes, canals and a powerhouse - staff members said the use of recycled water might be less attractive to developers.

Staff members have said the district must be able to determine the demand for recycled water so it can develop adequate facilities.

The new policy applies to property within the area of mandatory recycled water use as defined in the district's Recycled Water Master Plan.

Use of recycled water would be required if it could be provided at a reasonable cost to the developer and the district, and if the water is of adequate quality for the intended use.

"There may be some uses that recycled water is not appropriate for," said Tracy Eden-Bishop, an associate engineer with the district.

In addition to Serrano, MJM Properties, developer of the Carson Creek and Valley View projects in El Dorado Hills, has entered into an agreement with the irrigation district to use recycled water.

In all, developers have committed to use recycled water for about 8,000 homes in El Dorado Hills, said Kirk Bone, spokesman for Parker Development Co., developer of Serrano.

Mike McDougall, project manager for MJM Properties, previously questioned the need to require use of recycled water, but he and Bone backed the policy Monday.

Before adopting the new policy, the board sought to assure developers that the district would offset the cost of the dual-plumbed systems by granting a \$2,555 credit on water facility capacity charges for new dwellings that use recycled water. The facility capacity charge is a one-time fee paid at the time a home hooks up to the system.

Developers have been receiving a \$945 credit.

At the same time, the board voted to increase the facility capacity charge for wastewater by \$1,404 per dwelling unit.

District Counsel Tom Cumpston said provisions of Proposition 218 require the district to notify affected property owners of the facility capacity charge increase. The measure, approved by California voters in 1996, requires the board to reject the increase if written protests are submitted by a majority of affected property owners.

Cumpston said the notification process could take 45 to 60 days.

The district expects to save about \$100 million by recycling water from its wastewater treatment plants and eliminating discharges into streams.

Because the savings would benefit all wastewater customers, Bone said the costs of providing components of the recycled water system, such as seasonal storage facilities, should not be borne solely by recycled-water users.

"We want to make sure that 8,000 (recycled-water) customers aren't responsible for the total cost of saving that \$100 million," he said.

Bone also had urged the district to re-evaluate the ratio of recycled water to potable water used per household.

The number of homes Serrano is allowed to build is based on the estimated potable water use per unit. In its initial agreement with Serrano, the irrigation district had anticipated that homes would use 50 percent recycled water and 50 percent potable water.

Staff members said an analysis of water use in the irrigation district's Assessment District 3, which includes Serrano, indicates that homes are using about 40 percent potable water and 60 percent recycled water.

They noted, however, that the original agreement anticipated total water use per dwelling at .67 acre-feet annually. The analysis showed actual consumption is .75 acre-feet per household.

Because total water consumption per household is higher than the initial estimate, staff members said they could not recommend adjusting the ratio.

The new policy will specify that developers using recycled water may build two homes for every one home they would have been allowed to build had they not used recycled water.

"We have to have 2-1 to go for recycled water," MJM Properties McDougall said. "It's the threshold to say 'yes' or 'no.' "

Directors said they could consider a 3-1 ratio once the district has contracts in place to draw additional water from Folsom Lake.

Recycled Water

The El Dorado Irrigation District plans to use recycled water from its wastewater treatment plants to irrigate:

- * Front and back yards of 8,000 homes in El Dorado Hills
- * Commercial landscaping
- * Parks
- * Sports fields
- * Golf courses

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