

Michele Pla: More recycled water is needed

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FOR REASONS ranging from climate change, to reduced rainfall, to Delta smelt, water agencies around the Bay Area and state are asking us to cut back on the water we use. Some agencies have declared 2007 a drought year.

Although these efforts are important, water conservation can only take us so far. The Association of Bay Area Governments predicts that an additional 1.7 million people will make the Bay Area their home over the next 25 years. The regional demand for water calls for a reliable, drought-proof water supply that is already here in the Bay Area.

That water supply solution exists: recycled water.

Our precious supply of expensive, limited, potable water should be saved for drinking. The huge consequences of low snow pack and warmer temperatures point clearly at the need to invest in more water recycling projects. Using recycled wastewater for golf courses, parks and industrial cooling is proven to protect health, extend the potable supply and is technically feasible.

The Bay Area Clean Water Agencies, leaders in urban water resource management, recently published a paper on the importance of recycled water to the Bay Area. The paper provides many key messages.

Recycled water uniquely meets multiple regional objectives, it is affordable, and we know how to ensure it is safe for all legal uses. While several local Bay Area water and wastewater agencies are already investing local dollars in the development of recycled water, state and federal partnerships are needed to finance recycled water projects so that this technology can be used to the greatest extent possible.

The state is moving forward with the distribution of funds made available from both Proposition 50 passed by the voters in 2002, as well as Proposition 84 approved in November 2006. In fact, the state has set a goal to recycle at least 1.5 million acre-feet per year of recycled water by the year 2020. One acre foot can cover a football field in one foot of water and is enough to supply two families for a year (three in Marin).

Now the federal government is stepping up to the plate. Rep. George Miller, together with six Bay Area co-sponsors, passed HR 6218 to fund Bay Area Regional Water Recycling Program projects in Pacifica, Pittsburg, Antioch, Palo Alto, Mountain View, Redwood City and Gilroy. A companion bill, Senate Bill 1475, is now in the Senate, thanks to Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein.

We are counting on our elected officials to bring a well-deserved federal partnership to our regional water solutions - and we need the state to continue its grant programs offering assistance to near term, feasible, ready-to-go projects that can produce both regional and

statewide benefits.

Unless the state and federal government work with Bay Area water agencies, we at the local level simply will not be able to use recycled water as effectively as possible. In a low rain year and with climate change upon us, the time for a concerted group effort is now.

Michele Pla is executive director of the Bay Area Clean Water Agencies.