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Water-Reuse Ideas Go Forward, Despite 'Toilet to Tap' Concerns

By AUDREY WHITE

WICHITA FALLS — The idea of turning treated sewage into drinking water may give some people pause.

But with lake levels having officially dropped below 40 percent of capacity on Tuesday, this onetime oil boomtown plans to move ahead with the technology. The city hopes to produce five million gallons of water a day next year with potable-reuse technology, which officials say is safe.

“There was probably a lot of reservations about reuse water projects when we first discussed it in the late '90s,” Mayor Glenn Barham said. Now, with the drought, he said people have “realized we’ve got to take steps to make our water supply stable.”

The city is one of several in Texas pursuing reuse projects. This spring, a \$14 million plant in the West Texas hamlet of Big Spring will begin turning treated wastewater into drinking water and distribute about two million gallons of it daily to the Midland-Odessa area. Brownwood recently received approval from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to build a reuse plant. Abilene and Lubbock are in the early stages of looking at the technology.

“People are paying very, very close attention to what Texas is doing with its potable-reuse initiatives,” said Zachary Dorsey, a spokesman for the WaterReuse Association.

In direct potable-reuse, treated wastewater goes through additional chemical and biological processes and extensive filtration and then usually mixes with the regular drinking water supply before going through normal drinking water treatment.

The Big Spring plant will be the first of its kind in the nation. El Paso and Orange County, Calif., also have pioneering reuse projects, but their treated wastewater gets sent through an aquifer before being pumped up for further cleaning. At Big Spring, there is no aquifer step.

Neither the commission on environmental quality nor the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) has produced regulations for water reuse. The Texas Water Development Board has hired an

engineering firm to provide guidelines.

Health experts say they are confident about the safety of drinking reused wastewater that has gone through proper treatment processes, said Jeff Mosher, executive director of the National Water Research Institute, a California nonprofit. The taste is unlikely to be different from other drinking water.

Critics, who sometimes call potable-reuse “toilet to tap,” still have doubts.

“I’ve had experience with people who pour an incredible variety of chemicals down their drain,” said Christopher Stephens, a rheumatologist in Brownwood. He said the reuse project had been pushed through too hastily and that the city should have first pursued more aggressive conservation measures.

In Wichita Falls, officials expect commission on environmental quality approval soon for their project. The city already treats brackish water from a nearby lake to drinking-water standards, so much of the treatment infrastructure exists. A pipeline to connect the wastewater and drinking water plants will cost about \$9 million or about \$13 million, depending on which plan is adopted, and the city plans to expand the reuse system later, said Daniel K. Nix, the public utilities operations manager for Wichita Falls.

The city needs above-average rainfall to stabilize the city’s surface water supply. But “you can’t go buy a rain,” Mr. Nix said.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 7, 2013

A previous version of this article stated incorrectly what will be stabilized by above-average rainfall in Wichita Falls. It is the city’s surface water supply, not the groundwater supply.

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