

Recycled Water Expansion Project: Frequently Asked Questions

City of Palo Alto Regional Water Quality Control Plant

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1. What is “recycled water”?

Recycled water is treated wastewater that has gone through all the processes at the Regional Water Quality Control Plant (RWQCP) in Palo Alto which also serves the East Palo Alto Sanitary District, Los Altos, Los Altos Hills, Mountain View, and Stanford. Water used in homes and offices travels through pipes to the RWQCP. The water is cleaned through physical, chemical and biological processes so that it ends up looking much like drinking water. These complex cleaning processes require careful maintenance and monitoring to make sure that the water can be discharged safely into San Francisco Bay without harm to the ecosystem, and safely used for many purposes.

2. What is the Regional Water Quality Control Plant Water Reuse Program?

The RWQCP Water Reuse Program, initiated in 1980, was created to bring a reliable, sustainable and drought-proof supply of water to the South Bay. The recycled water system is used to irrigate parks and golf courses.

3. Are recycled water supplies kept separate from drinking water?

Yes. Standard practice requires separate pipes for drinking water and recycled water. Guidelines set by the Department of Health Services ensure that recycled water facilities are clearly distinguishable from other water facilities to avoid mixing of supplies. Pipes are colored purple, and labeled with the words "Recycled Water– Do Not Drink."

4. Is recycled water the same as gray water?

No. Gray water is water from clothes washing machines, or similar water which, although untreated, is not contaminated by human waste or food preparation.

5. Why is recycling water important?

By recycling water residents and businesses can continue to irrigate landscaping, even during severe droughts. Every gallon of recycled water used on landscaping means a gallon of potable water is saved for drinking and other uses. Limited water supplies will continue tightening statewide. The Santa Clara Valley Water District estimates that by the year 2020, the South Bay could experience severe water shortages during a drought unless efforts are made to increase water supplies.

6. Is the recycled water safe for irrigating gardens and landscaping?

Yes, the State has approved this type of highly treated recycled water for use on all types of landscaping, turf, gardens and crops. Recycled water is not for drinking, however. To be completely safe, and avoid human ingestion, it should not to be sprayed on people or left in ponds that children could play in.

7. Is it safe for children and pets to play on grass irrigated by recycled water?

Yes, the California Department of Health Services has very high treatment standards for recycled water. Palo Alto’s recycled water meets or exceeds all state standards for water

used for irrigation and other uses with similar public exposure. Ponding of recycled water on grass or other areas is specifically prohibited as added insurance that a significant amount could not be ingested by children. In addition, according to Dr. Stanley Deresinski, Clinical Professor, Stanford School of Medicine, one would have to drink at least 12 gallons of reclaimed water, in a single sitting, in order to ingest an infectious dose of coliform bacteria.

8. What about contaminants that are not removed from the water?

While small concentrations of pollutants are found in recycled water, there is no exposure route for these compounds to be ingested by humans when using recycled water for landscape and industrial purposes. Program staff monitor research regarding treatment technologies, mechanisms of human exposure, and health risk assessments to ensure that reuse practices protect human health.

9. Is the use of recycled water for irrigation regulated by government?

Yes. California laws regulating recycled water are located in the Health and Safety Code, the Water Code, and Titles 17 and 22 of the California Code of Regulations. A permit process, training, signage and a number of restrictions apply to entities transporting and applying recycled water from the RWQCP. Residents or businesses accepting the recycled water must read and sign a statement to insure they are fully aware of the recycled water application and its restrictions.

10. Is recycled water being used now?

In the Palo Alto Region, recycled water is used for irrigation of parks and golf courses and habitat restoration. Recycled water is used for landscape irrigation at Palo Alto Golf Course, Greer Park Shoreline Golf Course and many businesses in Mountain View. Palo Alto's Emily Renzel Marsh is a freshwater marsh fed with recycled water. Recycled water is also being used in thousands of locations nationwide and worldwide.

11. Is recycled water used elsewhere?

Recycled water is used in thousands of locations nationwide. More than 170 billion gallons of water are recycled in California each year.

12. Are there problems with the salt content of the RWQCP recycled water?

Palo Alto's recycled water has been used on almost all plants and grasses successfully for many years. However, it is saltier than the drinking water supply. It is not recommended for Redwood trees or other salt sensitive plant species. The RWQCP Partners have already completed projects that have substantially reduced salt levels (as measured by total dissolved solids or "TDS"), and will continue to plan and implement projects that will further reduce TDS levels. Chapter 2 of the Draft Environmental Impact Report for Palo Alto Recycled Water Project describes these efforts.

13. How would Recycled Water Expansion Project be funded? Securing funding is vital to the feasibility of the project. As part of the funding pursuit, a detailed financial plan (including annual projections) will be developed.

14. What are the recycled water market assurances? The City has developed a [recycled water use ordinance](#) and plans on designating a recycled water use area in the near future.