Pasadena Star News – October 7, 2001

Most state water quality report cards good, but they must get better

By Timothy F. Brick

When water runs low, everyone notices, but in Southern California, that isn't likely to happen any time soon. Instead Southern Californians worry about water quality. We stand in lines to see "Erin Brockovich" and we fret over the latest Superfund site and arsenic.

And we debate the virtues of tap water versus bottled water. Rather than trudge to a "water store" and pay anywhere from 20 cents to more than a dollar a gallon for drinking water, one can turn the faucet and pay less than a dollar for a year's supply that's just as safe.

If we really want to know what's going on, we should read the annual water quality report that every water agency is required by law to issue.

Behind these technical-looking tables are some important facts. Where does our tap water come from? What's in it? What contaminants does the state consider dangerous? How do we measure those contaminants? How do they get into our water? At what level do contaminants threaten public health? At what level does it start making water look, taste or smell bad?

There is a fairly significant water quality report card that millions of Southern Californians never even see. It comes from the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Metropolitan is a cooperative that delivers water wholesale to its 26 member public agencies.

Metropolitan regularly conducts tests for about 90 mandatory health-related standards. Only 13 health-related standards are listed on the report card, because the vast majority of the constituents we test cannot be detected. Of those constituents that we detect, in most cases Metropolitan meets those standards by more than a country mile.

The closest that the Metropolitan report card comes to the maximum contaminant level is in the area of trihalomethanes – which are a byproduct of chlorination. At most plants, if the average readings doubled, they would top the state's maximum level of 100 parts per billion. That's why at least two Metropolitan treatment plants will see their primary disinfection agent changed from chlorine to ozone, which produces much lower trihalomethane levels.

At three out of five Metropolitan plants, the average level is of "total dissolved solids" (shorthand for salinity) is 500 parts per million (ppm). Although well below the state's 1,000 ppm standard, it's like having more than 500 pounds of salt

delivered to your home every year.

Much of that is due to high salinity levels on the Colorado River, which Metropolitan. To improve the situation, Metropolitan blends its Colorado River water with less-salty Northern California water and supports research into low-cost desalination.

Metropolitan has also enlisted in California's battle to get rid of MTBE, a gasoline additive that helps clean our air but makes water taste like turpentine and triggers cancer in lab animals. MTBE contamination of Southern California water wells increases pressure for MWD imported supplies. California could meet clean-air standards without MTBE, but Congress has thumbed its nose, preferring to force the Golden State to choose between MTBE and costly ethanol.

One of the biggest water-quality issues is cleaning up the source waters of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta east of San Francisco Bay. Another important source-protection issue is protecting the Colorado River by moving the uranium pile at Moab, Utah.

Southern Californians need to check out the grades their local water utility is getting, and then ask hard questions about what consumers and water providers can do.

Whether it's tackling new treatment methods or the less costly approach of cleaning up rivers, reservoirs and groundwater at the source, it's better to prepare at the front end than to attempt an all-night cram session. We need nothing less than a straight A report card.

Timothy F. Brick is a board member for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, representing the city of Pasadena, where he served 14 years as a commissioner overseeing the municipal water and power department.