

Why Do We Abandon Science in Favor of PR? Orange County Follies

By Frank Pecarich, Retired Soil Scientist
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We are gradually recovering from the stunning news that for the last 9 or so years, Monterey County has been irrigating tender leafy green vegetables like spinach and lettuce with tertiary treated sewage effluent on the 12,000 agricultural acres within the boundary of the Castroville Sea Water Intrusion Project. It has been established in the research I have covered in earlier installments of this continuing saga, that irrigating crops such as lettuce and spinach -- which are usually consumed raw -- with treated effluent is a most dangerous activity as pathogens such as E. coli 0157:H7 can get through to the irrigation water and to the plant.

Orange County Follies: The Role of PR

Well, as we sit back and come to the realization that for the past decade we have probably been subjected to this form of public treachery, we find that Orange County may be building our next contamination nightmare, something they actually call a "toilet-to-tap" project which will cost consumers and taxpayers \$487 million dollars and is scheduled to be completed in 2007.

For more information you might refer to an incredibly instructive news article published on October 25, 2004 in the Los Angeles Daily News, entitled, <<http://www.casperstartribune.net/articles/2004/10/25/news/regional/babf2a0af16b0b2687256f37006fea0b.txt>> "Reclamation Makes Orange County Drought Proof". In the usual way that I have come to see this kind of project described and "pitched", the focus is on saving or recycling water rather than the issue of human safety.

All in lather about what woes will befall the community, these projects are sold to the public by massive PR efforts that conspire to diffuse information and wear down resistance until the citizenry yields. This story in the Los Angeles Daily News contrasts the similar efforts of Orange County with their neighbor to their north, Los Angeles. It seems that Los Angeles didn't go out and hire PR firms to help "tap dance" this highly questionable idea past the electorate. They had the idea that holding public hearings and taking a low key approach to water deficiency problems was, well . the democratic thing to do.

Los Angeles apparently also had "toilet-to-tap" water saving efforts as just one possible option within an array of possibilities. In other words they didn't come to the public with a "baked cake" and the solution already decided that simply needed to be sold to the uninformed public.

Well, calling in the PR onslaught is exactly what Orange County did as the article points out. To heck with public hearings, we know the "answer"; let's just talk them into it.

Ah. this has to be a PR person's idea of heaven. Orange County officials bragged that "far from being repulsed at the thought of drinking reclaimed water, Orange County residents are boasting they'll have dependable, cheaper water when imported supplies dry up and leave the rest of Southern California parched." Isn't that just dandy?

The article points out that "Orange County took their plan to the community, holding neighborhood pizza parties, water treatment plant tours and hundreds of public meetings where they explained how sewer water would be purified and then added to underground water supplies." It goes on to say, that popular "Public television personality Huell Howser was hired to narrate a video explaining how earthy-smelling wastewater will be transformed into distilled, crystal clear water." How groovy.

They did have a bit of a hard time from those sometimes diehard protectors of the public interest, elected politicians. They say, "Politicians, initially skeptical of the project, were convinced to add their support." In the article, U.S. Rep. Loretta Sanchez, D-Garden Grove, said, "the thought didn't thrill me, to tell you the truth," of her initial reaction to drinking purified sewage water. "I see at the federal level the fight over water. We need to do something and after looking at the science I realize how lucky we are to be able to do this project."

Well Loretta, at least you gave it some serious thought. The "shuck and jive" being put out by these "experts" and their PR machine effort was probably an awesome thing to behold. In these unbelievable times, it's pretty hard to sell the truth when misinformation and distortion seem to sell so easily. You know the old saying, "truth is stranger than fiction"?

I have always been impressed at the ability of a good PR message to make a normally sensible person "take leave of their senses" as my dear departed mother would say. Instead of worrying about drinking tertiary treated sewage effluent, the PR genies substituted that logical concern with an Orange County native's pride at being smarter than others by solving the local water deficiency problem. Hey, P.T. Barnum would be proud.

Exporting the Folly

In fact, the more I research this rather crazy program of using tertiary treated water on our veggies and now taking it directly to Orange County's drinking glass, the concept of "misuse of Public Relations" pops out at me with wild abandon. One of the trade association organizations which promote these risky uses is called the <http://www.watereuse.org/index.html%20> Watereuse Association. They're having a big conference in Santa Rosa, California, at the end of October this year ending appropriately enough, on Halloween, October 31st.

If you search the Internet for the organization or some of their members, you'll find long lists of speeches and public presentations throughout this country as well as abroad where they have taken this message of using treated sewage effluent for what we believe to be dangerous and unsafe uses. Some of these people remind me of what Typhoid Mary could have been had she had access to a briefcase and a podium.

Monterey County in their plan to sell their program of using tertiary treated sewage effluent used a PR firm. If you recall from earlier stories, hiring a PR firm was about the only thing the Monterey County Board of Supervisors decided to do as a solution to a long list of problems identified in a Monterey County Grand Jury report in 1999. And they hired Ketchum <http://www.ketchum.com/DisplayWebPage/0,1003,28,00.html> Incorporated which, from a look at their web page, is a very potent entity.

They describe themselves as "one of the world's leading public relations agencies." They go on to say about themselves, "with five major global practices and a worldwide network of public relations specialists, Ketchum can swiftly mobilize its global resources to produce meaningful results for clients." Golly, they sound so potent, maybe we should get them on the Iraq war problem?

I have to mention that Ketchum boasts on their web page that they have won "Ninety-six PRSA Silver Anvils" and "are three-time winners of Inside PR's Agency of the Year. Eighty-plus years of experience. Scores of offices and affiliates." Oh my. the lettuce and spinach farmers of Monterey never had a chance. They were dead meat, as it were. But tell me, what does a "silver anvil" symbolize? Never mind, I don't think I want to know.

Anyway, Monterey made the decision to hire these folks and the rest is history. Can't you just see those poor farmers having to suffer the indignity of not having their valid concerns considered by the Monterey County Board of Supervisors. And, for their insolence in bringing up such concerns, they had to suffer years of re-education. Apparently the Board of Supervisors thought their thinking was faulty and needed a rewashing.

That takes us back to the water reuse trade association, named appropriately, Watereuse Association albeit spelled a little funky. If you look at their webpage, you'll find a long list of success stories telling of their outreach ventures of spreading their brand of truth on the splendors of using treated sewage water. They even ventured out of this country often taking their briefcases, polished shoes and Power Point presentations. One of their "informational" recipients according to their website, was a presentation to Iraq. As I think about it, do you think that's why the Iraqis seem so angry? I wonder.

Apparently Orange County thought this whole approach was so dandy that they decided to start right away with the PR onslaught and cut out much in the way of collaborative dialog, citizen's participation and public involvement and all that stuff where you actually have to listen to the people. Hey, if you already know the answer, why waste time allowing others to talk much about it? Close the deal!

I know one thing, this new world of fast talking, fast walking, PR-focused approaches to what essentially is a scientific issue makes my old gray head spin. I even to start thinking, heck if I hadn't taken all that science in school and had a few courses in public relations and "effective communications", maybe I could have "been somebody". Sigh. hey, I'm only 65, maybe I still have a chance?

Unanswered Scientific Questions

And then I think, get a hold of yourself. Those folks in Orange County have reason to be concerned. Even with the described high level of sewage water treatment described in the glossy brochures, the scientist in me says "caution". My little band of multi-disciplined scientists has pointed out to me that there is much concern still in the scientific community about what outfits like Orange County propose.

They tell me about such disturbing things as "endocrine disruption" and that reverse osmosis is not typically used for reduction of biological pathogens. They also point out that E. coli can be merely "inactivated" in these treatment processes. I think, while I'm not a MD and microbiologist like one of my research team members, "endocrine disruption" doesn't sound good. I make a note to ask my fellow scientist what happens when you get your endocrine disrupted. That can't be good, I'm thinking!

And what does it mean to be "inactivated"? Is that like football where a player is put on the "inactive" list until he gets well and can play again? It sure sounds like it to me. Visions of little E. coli 0157:H7 sitting on the bench waiting to get called into the game flood my mind. Horrors.

Further my small band of scientists deluges me with valid questions when I show them what Orange County has planned. They ask, "Can this knock out all the pharmaceuticals, endocrine disrupters, etc. that end up in sewage effluent?" My friends say, "these as residuals can either select for or maintain antibiotic resistance. And another serious question Frank is, "does genetic information get through this treatment, including naked DNA?" Frank, "it has been shown that archeans -- these are a different kingdom than that which contains bacteria -- can reassemble following radiation disrupted genetic material. UV is just a form of radiation that plays with dimers on the DNA."

My head is really swimming now. I admit to being stuck on the mental image of "naked DNA". I always thought those guys in bacteriology had all the fun. Now I am having my suspicions confirmed. But I finally collect my thoughts and realize that these are some nasty sounding effects my friends are throwing out. Now I need to seriously think about radiation disrupted genetic material and something about radiation playing with my "dimer".

But this I do know. I know the sterling reputations of my scientific friend and that they know what they're talking about. And the real thing in their favor is that they don't wear highly polished shoes, carry a briefcase and show me fancy Power Point presentations. Maybe they should think about shuffling on down to Orange County and help the citizens talk more about these things we'll call science - not PR.

Now for me, I think I still have some semi-polished shoes in the closet and if I look real hard, I can find my old briefcase. Now if someone can tell me about how to make a Power Presentation. I may still have time to "make something of myself" just as my mother had hoped.

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An informational hearing is scheduled for Wednesday, October 11, 2006 before the California State Senate Governmental Organization Committee that is titled "Unraveling the e.coli outbreak: Are state emergency response systems prepared for outbreaks of food borne illnesses?" Perhaps the state should be asking other questions as well.