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Recycled water? We're not that thirsty

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DRINKING recycled water doesn't wash with most Australians, with nearly half believing it contains human waste and 70 per cent equating it with purified sewage.

A survey of 1000 Australians' perceptions of recycled and desalinated water shows that authorities face a tough time overcoming the public's distaste for drinking or bathing in recycled water.

Almost 30 per cent thought recycled water was "disgusting" and one in four believed it stained the washing. Only 11 per cent said they would be very likely to use it for drinking.

The Wollongong University survey also found misconceptions about desalination, with one in five people thinking the water contained substances such as hormones or endocrine disruptors that could affect fertility.

Respondents overwhelmingly believed desalinated water was safer and more acceptable for drinking than recycled water.

However, desalinated water was also regarded as more expensive, a greater environmental concern, and worse for greenhouse emissions.

The survey, the first in Australia and possibly the world comparing attitudes to desalination and recycling, was conducted last year by Professor Sara Dolnicar from the university's school of management and marketing and Professor Andrea Schafer from the University of Edinburgh. It was funded by Federal Government grants.

Several prominent politicians and water experts have supported using recycled effluent as drinking water as catchments hit record lows in the current drought. In Queensland, recycling was rejected by Toowoomba residents last July despite severe water restrictions.

More than 1.7 million residents in south-east Queensland, from Tweed River to Toowoomba in the west, will vote in a plebiscite on March 17 on whether recycled water should be part of the water supply.

In Perth, the Water Corporation has plans for a four-year trial, which would pump 1.5 gigalitres of treated effluent into an aquifer. Acting Premier Eric Ripper said he would have no problem drinking recycled waste water, but agreed there was public concern on the issue.

Prime Minister John Howard recently said "it's part of the solution", and Treasurer Peter Costello said it was the "final step" of measures to overcome shortages.

The Victorian Government does not support using recycled water for drinking.

But Ken Matthews, chairman of the National Water Commission, told *The Sunday Age*: "With technology advancing, the recycling of water should be always on the agenda as a realistic water

supply option for communities."

Greg Hunt, the federal parliamentary secretary for the environment and heritage, said Australia discharged about 1800 billion litres of waste into oceans each year. Melbourne discharged about 350 billion litres, about two-thirds of the amount consumed each year.

While not ruling out recycled water for consumer use, the priority should be to reuse the waste water in industry and agriculture, he said.

Survey author Professor Dolnicar said a great deal of public debate and information about the advantages and disadvantages was necessary to enable people to make informed choices.

A recent report on recycling by industry group the Water Services Association says if recycled water was to supplement drinking water it should first be placed in a buffer such as a river, aquifer or dam and be treated before entering the distribution system. Natural biological processes would allow further purification while the water was stored.

Another option — not advocated by the association — was to add the recycled water directly into drinking water supplies without going to a buffer.

But the health risks of this option were "excessively high".

The association's report, titled *Refilling the Glass*, notes that separation of drinking water from sewerage systems was the greatest public health advance in the 20th century — a hard lesson learnt from typhoid and cholera epidemics.

"With good reason, generations of Australians have been educated about the principles of hygiene and understand why we do not mix our drinking water supplies with wastewater," the report says.

But the report said advances in technology now meant that recycled water could be of "drinking water quality" but community and technical issues would have to be addressed if recycled water were to be used in drinking supplies.

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