Would you drink recycled water? 80 per cent say ‘no’

By COURTNEY TRENWITH

AUSTRALIANS’ resistance to recycled and desalinated water is based on misconceptions and ill-informed opinions, according to a world first study by the University of Wollongong. Only 30 per cent of respondents to the nation-wide survey said they would drink recycled water, while less than half would bath their baby in desalinated water.

UOW Associate Professor Sara Dolnicar said the study revealed Australians were poorly educated about the facts and effects of both forms of water.

She said governments needed to improve public understanding before their proposals for new water sources would be accepted.

The ground-breaking study asked 1000 Australians about their perceptions, knowledge and acceptability of recycled and desalinated water.

“My feeling is there’s not much education on these issues. There’s lots of debate but not much education that comes from credible sources where people are informed about what the potential risks are, what the benefits are and what the associated costs are,” Prof Dolnicar said.

“Therefore, there’s natural anxiety in the population.”

The study – Desalination Versus Recycled Water – public perceptions, likelihood of adoption and profiles of early adopters, is believed to be the first in the world and was co-conducted by former UOW professor Andrea Schafer.

It comes one week after residents in Tuross Head voted against introducing recycled water to the drinks-rich town.

Prof Dolnicar said the fact 30 per cent of people believe desalinated water contained flavours proved their knowledge of the issue was poor.

“Desalinated water can’t have aromas,” Prof Dolnicar said. “You can see people are very confused. They clearly don’t have clear concepts about what these things are and what the true risks and benefits of each of these water sources are.”

She said the study showed people were concerned about the health, environmental and cost impacts.

Australians generally perceived desalinated water as environmentally unfriendly and recycled water as a public health hazard. Only 30 per cent of respondents said they would fully adopt desalinated or recycled water.

At least 60 per cent would use desalinated or recycled water for flushing the toilet, watering the garden or washing the car.

But the numbers significantly drop when it comes to more personal uses such as bathing, cooking and drinking.

Recycled water would be used half as much as desalinated water, according to the study. While 40 per cent would drink desalinated water, only 30 per cent would swallow recycled water. Nearly 80 per cent would cook using desalinated water, but only 30 per cent would use recycled water.

The study asked respondents to rank a list of occupations according to who they would trust the most for information on alternative water sources. Leading scientists and university professors topped the list, the prime minister was near the bottom.

EDITORIAL

Alarm bells ringing. P14

Immigration laws hit a hurdle

By SANDRA D’ITALY

THE Federal Government’s proposed legislation may have hit an insurmountable hurdle after Family First’s Steve Fielding signaled he would vote against the policy.

If one Government senator opposes the bill, or two abstain from the vote, the legislation will be sunk.

Three Liberals – Judi Moylan, Petro Georgiou and Russell Broadhead – last week crossed the floor in the lower house to vote against the changes which will see the rejection of all boat people processed offshore.

Liberals Bruce Baird and Nationals MP John Forrest abstained from the vote.

The intriguing intentions of a handful of Coalition senators who will decide the fate of the legislation remains unclear.

Policies Payne and Russell Fielding are undecided, while Victorian Judith Trood has deep reservations and is expected to either oppose the bill or abstain.

Queensland Nationals Senator Barnaby Joyce is preparing an amendment to the bill in exchange for his support.

But if that falls through, he too is likely to refrain.

Sen Joyce effectively wants to give the Senate a future right of veto over the laws on a case-by-case basis.

“If they start treating the people fairly and looking after them through this current process, then we will leave the Government alone,” he said.

“If they’re not treating them fairly then there’s no reason to make a disallowance motion.”

There are no guarantees the Government would entertain the change.

Prime Minister John Howard said he was unaware of a proposal of “any consequence.”

“You’ve got to remember we’ve already made a lot of amendments,” he said.

Mr Howard wasn’t making a last minute plea to senators to toe the party line, but he did remind them the policy was the majority government view.

“It is a... strongly held majority view and I would naturally ask that that be taken into account,” he said.

Debate on the legislation is due to begin in the Senate today and a vote is expected tomorrow.

While some Coalition senators are still equivocating, Sen Fielding was categorical on his position.

“I will be opposing the Government’s changes... I will vote against it,” he said.

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