Into the Future

When people find out I am involved with the water treatment industry, there is one topic that almost always comes up: the ongoing drought in California and other states, and what is being done about it.

People frequently bring up desalination—states like California and Texas have ample coastlines and easy access to seawater, so why not utilize it? I usually explain that although the technology exists to desalinate seawater, many municipalities and water districts have found that implementing them would be cost-prohibitive and turn to other options for water supply.

As water scarcity increases, however, desalination is increasingly on the radar for water providers. It also is increasingly reaching the public consciousness—CNN.com recently featured an article on desalination technology and a new desalination plant project that is currently underway in Carlsbad, Calif. (The title of the article is "How oceans can solve our freshwater crisis," no less—quite the statement given the challenges to not only fund the installation and maintenance of desalination plants, but deliver the water to anywhere not near the coast, which the article does address.)

The Carlsbad plant, when it is completed in 2016, will be the largest of its kind in the Western Hemisphere, producing 50 million gal of water per day for Southern California. More plants will follow—according to CNN, 17 more are being built or planned for the California coastline. As desalination technologies continue to improve, theoretically bringing costs down, these numbers will likely continue to grow in the U.S.

Plants like these are long-term projects. In fact, the CNN.com article asked readers to imagine the year 2035, when the author envisions that every coastal town will have its own desalination plant. But in the 21 years until this theoretical desalinated utopia, population will only continue to grow and water needs will only continue to increase—so how do we maximize our water resources in the meantime?

There are a multitude of answers to that question, but at the top of the list should be reusing the water we already have. Rainwater and greywater reuse systems—at the residential, commercial and industrial levels—are becoming increasingly common, especially as many municipalities offer rebates or other incentives to install them.

These systems can go from the simple—collecting rainwater in a rain barrel and using it to water plants—to complex—treating greywater for reuse as irrigation or toilet flushing, or even, with the proper treatment, drinking. Blackwater is not out of the question either. With proper treatment, it can be reused for applications such as toilet flushing or cooling tower makeup (visit www.wqpmag.com/drought-solutions-down-under for a good example of such a system).

In short, it's time as a water industry to put our heads together. From desalination to water reuse, we have the potential to innovate and implement cost-effective systems that will make it easier than ever to use our water resources as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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