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SDI/CERC Barometer Finds Public Embraces the Importance of Water Conservation and Willing to Undertake Steps to Address Problem

SAN DIEGO, CA – San Diegans view water availability as a key regional issue and are willing to consider bold policies to address the problem, according to public opinion research released today by the San Diego Institute for Policy Research (SDI).

The message about using water wisely has been embraced by most San Diego residents. In the latest SDI/CERC Public Opinion Barometer, 1008 randomly selected San Diego County residents were asked “How serious is the issue of water availability in San Diego County?” Two-thirds say it is either an extremely important issue (27.7%) or it is very serious (38.5%). Further, there is no demographic sub-segment that does not see water availability as at least a very serious issue.

These opinions are translating into conserving behavior. Fifty-eight percent say they are taking steps to reduce their water consumption this summer, with cutting back on irrigation/lawn watering (36%) and taking shorter showers or fewer baths (15%) being the actions reported most often. That said, the San Diego County Water Authority’s summer campaign to increase voluntary recycling, even after making significant investments, has only partially cut through the media clutter. More than half the County’s residents say they have heard nothing or almost nothing about CWA’s call to save 20 gallons a day. Further analysis shows that the marketing campaign is responsible for only a small portion of residents’ increased conservation efforts.

What policies does the public prefer? When given choices and arguments in favor and against, desalination emerges as the most popular option. Support for desalination is even stronger among the subset of registered voters. Support does drop after residents are told that it would be expensive and that critics have questioned the impact desalination plants would have on the coastal environment, but even then support remains over 50%. Also popular would be significantly stronger steps to encourage water conservation, including restrictions on the kind of landscape people could plant and increasing prices for those who use large amounts of water.

Public opinion is split on the controversial proposal to treat wastewater to potable standards and put it back into local reservoirs. Participants were asked the following:

“One proposal calls for treating wastewater to drinking water standards, pumping it into the region’s reservoirs, and then treating that re-purified water again at the region’s existing water treatment plants. Would you support or oppose plans to treat wastewater in San Diego County so that it would be drinkable?”

	Sep County %
Support, strongly	22.8
Support, somewhat	21.5
Oppose, somewhat	13.6
Oppose, strongly	35.8
Unsure (<i>Not Read</i>)	6.4

When respondents were presented supportive arguments (that Orange County CA uses a similar process; that it is environmentally friendly) and arguments in opposition (something could go wrong with the treatment plants; that it is known as “toilet-to-tap”), opinions shifted slightly more negative. “That ‘toilet-to-tap’ label really sticks,” says Nienstedt.

That said, the supportive argument about how Colorado River water is used by upstream communities does resonate with residents who are not strongly opposed to the proposal. Residents in the middle about the use of reclaimed water (those opposing somewhat, supporting somewhat, and those unsure) were asked the following:

“San Diego County gets more of its water from the Colorado River than anywhere else. That water gets 400 million gallons of treated wastewater discharged into it each day. So Williams argues that we’re already drinking treated wastewater so why not solve our water supply problems by treating our local water? Knowing this, are you more inclined or less inclined to support plans to treat wastewater in San Diego County so that it would be drinkable? (Asked of those who are not strongly supporting or strongly opposing wastewater treatment, n=462)”

	Sep County %
Much more inclined to support	21.6
Somewhat more inclined to support	40.7
Somewhat less inclined to support	17.8
Much less inclined to support	9.8
Unsure (<i>Not Read</i>)	10.1

“These results are interesting for proponents of recycled water,” said Nienstedt. “It means that, if a bully pulpit was used by a credible source, most residents are willing to listen -- even to the point of turning wastewater into drinking water. What would remain a challenge is the 36% of respondents who are deeply skeptical of this policy.”

During the coming weeks, SDI will be releasing the Barometer’s findings, as they are analyzed, on the views of City residents about the proposed Charter reforms (October 2).

About the SDI/Competitive Edge Barometer

The research was conducted from September 4 – 9, 2007 and included 1,005 randomly selected adult respondents within the County of San Diego. Where noted, results are reported either for the entire county or for only the sample of 505 adults living in the City of San Diego.

This survey was conducted by Competitive Edge Research & Communication (CERC) in conjunction with the San Diego Institute for Policy Research (SDI). SDI and CERC jointly determined the issues to be covered in this survey. SDI provided CERC with background information on the issues contained in the questionnaire and both entities discussed the topics in order to produce an effective questionnaire. Final responsibility for all questions and the data collection presented herein rests with CERC.

The interviewing was conducted in English and Spanish from CERC’s San Diego facility. Professional interviewers were trained specifically for this project. The duration of the average interview was 20 minutes. The random digit dial sample was provided by Scientific Telephone Samples of Foothill Ranch, CA. After collecting the data, results were weighted on the voter registration, gender, area and age variables to CERC’s estimates of the overall San Diego City population gathered from the US Census and the San Diego County Registrar of Voters.

Sampling Error

According to statistical theory, the confidence level associated with a sample of this type is such that, with a question where the respondents answer 50% "yes" and 50% "no," 95% of the time the results are within plus or minus $\pm 3.0\%$ of the *true value in the county*, where true value refers to the results obtained if it were possible to interview every possible qualified respondent. The degree of error is reduced when responses have larger (e.g. 60%-40%, 70%-30%) percentage differences. Conversely, the margin of error increases when a subset of the entire 1,005 responses is analyzed. In addition to error introduced by sampling variability, there are many other possible sources of bias such as how a question is worded, the question sequence, or individual interviewer techniques. Competitive Edge does everything in its power to minimize these potential sources of bias.

A survey of this type is a good measure of current attitudes that may change over time. This survey should not necessarily serve as an unqualified predictor of events, but as an indicator to the situation in early September, 2007.

About the San Diego Institute for Policy Research

The San Diego Institute for Policy Research (SDI) is a non-partisan organization whose goal is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector throughout San Diego County. Established in 2006, SDI produces high quality policy research papers, economic bulletins, public opinion polls and major events and symposiums to help generate debate and discussion amongst San Diego's decision makers and citizens alike.

About Competitive Edge Research & Communication

Competitive Edge Research & Communication is San Diego County's premier polling firm. Established in 1987, the firm provides insight and strategic advice to clients across the state and across the country. Among its many endeavors, the firm conducts its annual Super Bowl poll to determine the big game's effect on the host city. Competitive Edge is proud to be affiliated with SDI in this effort to provide San Diegans with a reliable barometer of public opinion.

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