

SDIPR-CERC Barometer: Water

San Diego County Survey, September 07

(n=1008 adult County residents) RDD

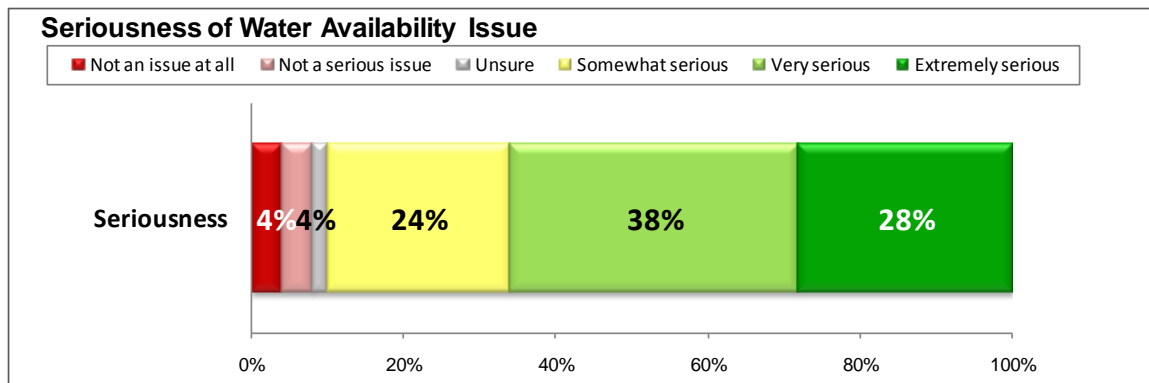
Weighted on Voter Registration, Age, Gender

Field dates: September 4-9

Analysis by John E. Nienstedt, CERC President

Water, Water Everywhere, but Less and Less to Drink

This installment of the SDI/CERC Barometer shows that San Diego County residents now perceive that a water crisis is brewing. Only 10% see water availability as a less than serious issue and two-thirds rate the situation as very or extremely serious.



Most people say they are now taking steps to conserve water: 85% relate that they have done something to conserve water. On the other hand, most of those folks admit they have not made a “big effort” to conserve water this summer. What have residents done to stop wasting water? Though waste-fighting efforts have taken many forms, the most popular is reducing the amount of lawn-watering. As one longtime east county resident told us, “I haven’t watered my grass; it’s yellow now!” Shortened showers and fewer baths are other popular forms of conservation. The San Diego County Water Authority’s 20-gallon challenge has pierced the County’s consciousness, but has not overwhelmed it or had a large effect on conservation. Only 14% have heard a lot about the official request for voluntary water conservation whereas 52% have heard almost nothing or nothing at all about it.

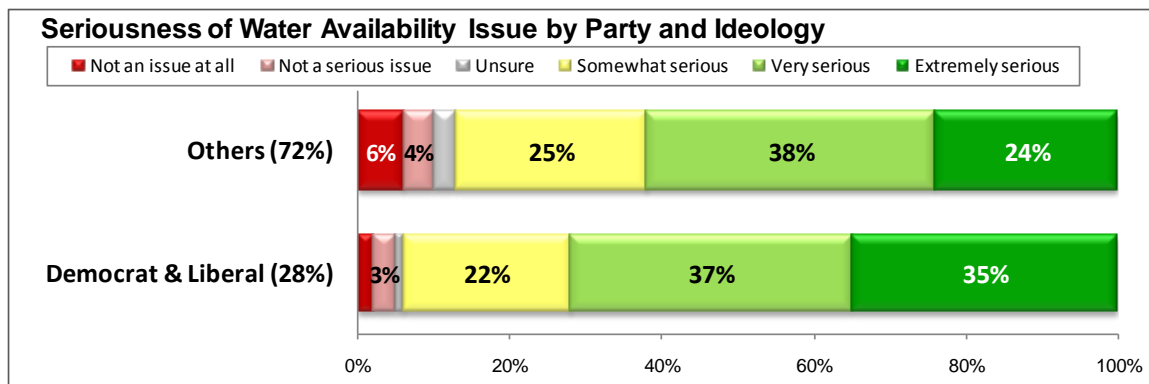
When it comes to preferred ways of dealing with water shortages, the clear winner – among the three alternatives we tested -- at this point is seawater desalination. There is a huge amount of support for

this approach and, even when environmental, coastal access and cost concerns are leveled at desalination, more than half the residents support the idea. Water conservation is also an idea that gets widespread support, though it is clearly second in popularity to desalination. Treating wastewater to make it drinkable is a tough sell. About half the residents oppose this alternative, and the “toilet-to-tap” slogan seems to have stuck. However, we find that a large number of residents are somewhat swayed by the argument that the water we drink is *already* treated wastewater from the Colorado River. This should give the proponents of using recycled water some hope of changing the debate.

Seriousness of the Water Situation

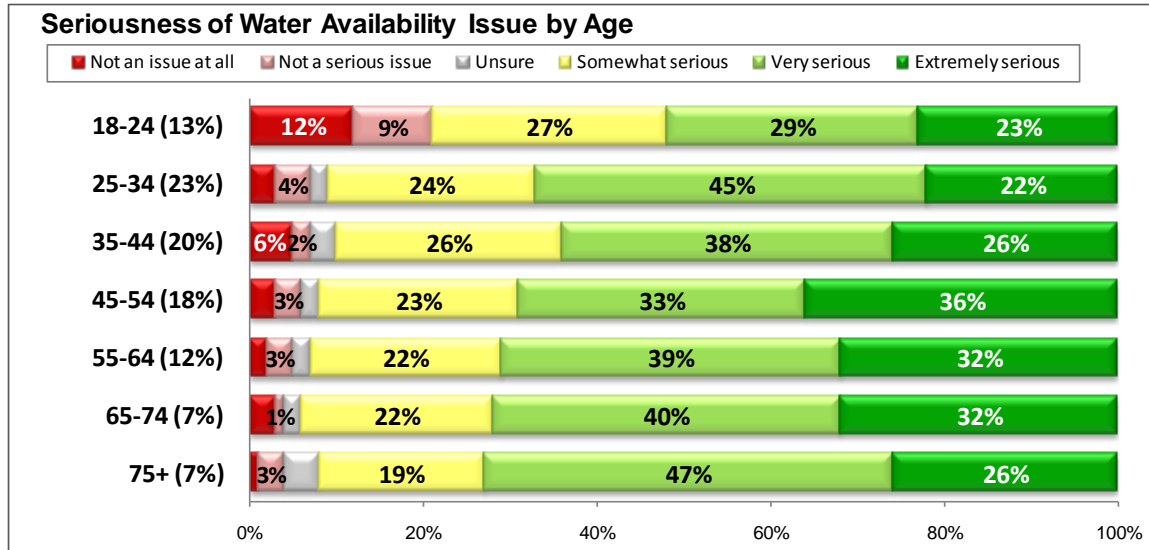
Residents apparently understand that San Diego County is facing a water crunch. Twenty-eight percent see this as an extremely serious situation, and, though more see it as only very serious, few say there is not a water availability problem.

Analyzing this data, we find that there are no subgroups which see the situation as anything less than very serious. So the differences between segments of the population are at the margins. That said, there is a fairly strongly partisan/ideological element to concern over water. Liberal Democrats are significantly more inclined to couch the situation as extremely serious. This probably taps into heightened environmental sensitivities in the left wing of the Democratic Party. As the chart shows, 35% of liberal Democrats rate the situation as extremely serious, while only 25% of other residents elevate the situation to that level.

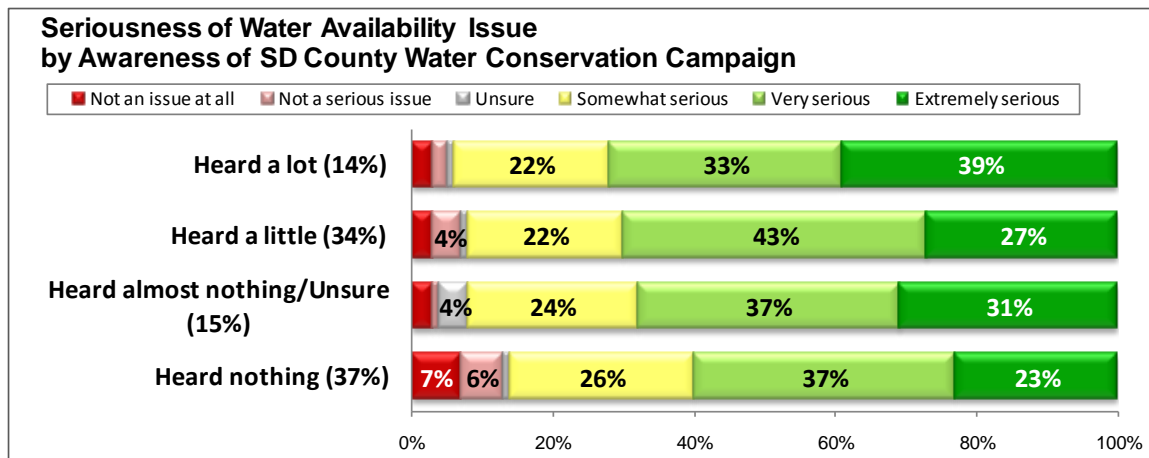


Older folks also tend to show more concern over water availability while the youngest age cohort is not quite so worried. Only 23% of 18 to 24 year-olds say an extremely serious crisis faces the County and nearly the same percentage (21%) say water availability is not a serious issue. However, the perception

of seriousness rises steadily from there, as the chart shows. Not only have those in their late-teens and early-twenties not been exposed to previous long-term droughts (such as the one San Diego endured in the late 1980s), but they tend to be less attentive to local news.



The survey also shows that hearing more about the Water Authority's recent efforts to spur the public's water conservation has probably had an effect. Lacking experimental data makes it impossible to say for certain, but there is a significant correlation showing that, as exposure to the marketing effort increases, the perception of seriousness also increases. Among those who have seen, read or heard a lot about the Authority's 20-gallon challenge, 39% perceive the situation as extremely serious, while that figure is only 23% among those who have not been exposed to the Authority's message.

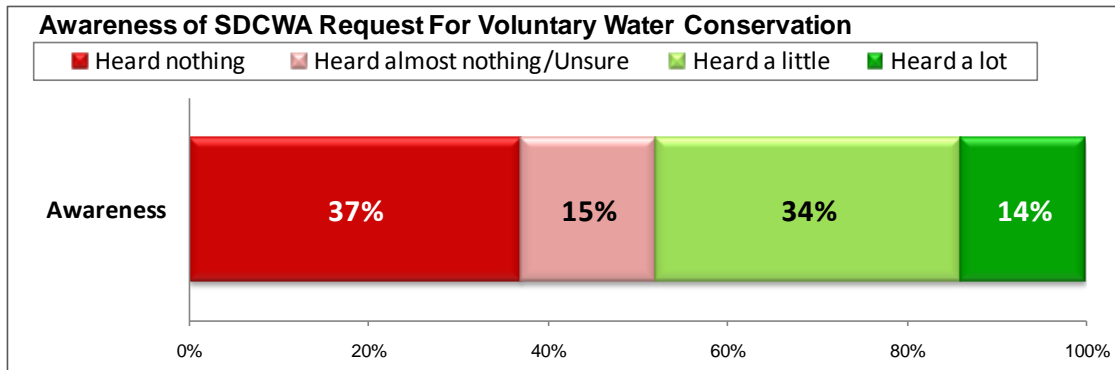


Analysis also shows that those who trust local government less tend to be more concerned with the issue. Thirty-one percent who say they trust their local government “only some of the time” regard the problem as extremely serious, but just 12% of those who trust government “just about always” see the situation that way.

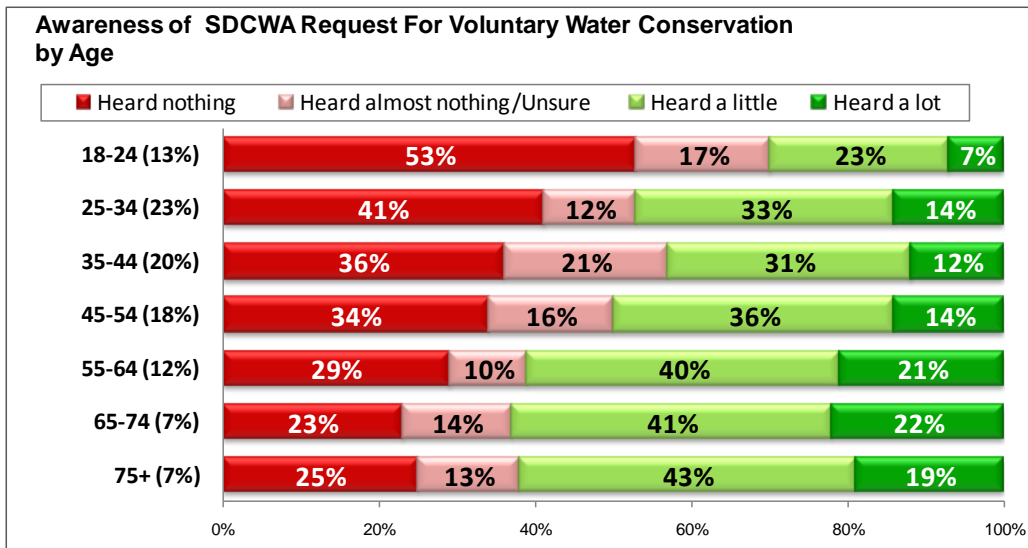
We also find less concern about water availability among English-speaking Hispanics.

Awareness of the SDCWA’s Water Conservation Efforts

Awareness of the SDCWA’s plea for water conservation is not high. On the other hand, it is not non-existent either.



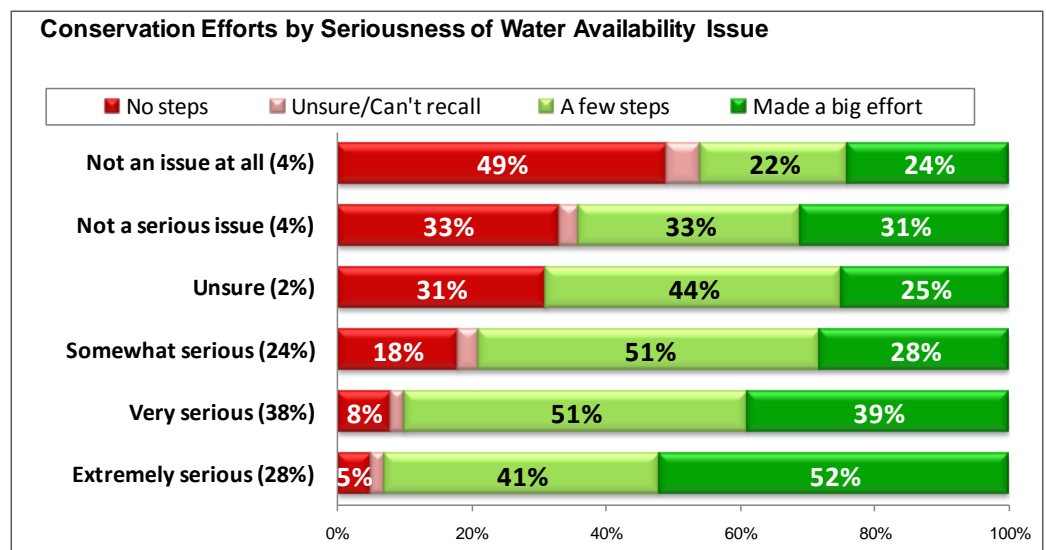
The Authority has been most successful in building awareness among older residents. Sixty-two percent of those over the age of 64 have heard at least a little about conserving water from the SDCWA and 20% say they have heard a lot. On the other hand, only half of those in the 35 to 64 year-old category have heard at least a little about the Authority’s request for voluntary conservation and, among those under the age of 35, only 41% have heard at least a little about it. This is probably another reason why actual conservation efforts on the part of residents correlate with age and suggests that the Authority’s media outreach is traditional, rather than focused on new media such as the Internet which younger residents gravitate toward.



The survey also shows that Asian-Americans tend to be much less aware of the voluntary request for conservation. Half say they have heard nothing about it. This suggests that the Authority has a “hole” in its media mix which is not communicating with the 6% in the County who are Asian.

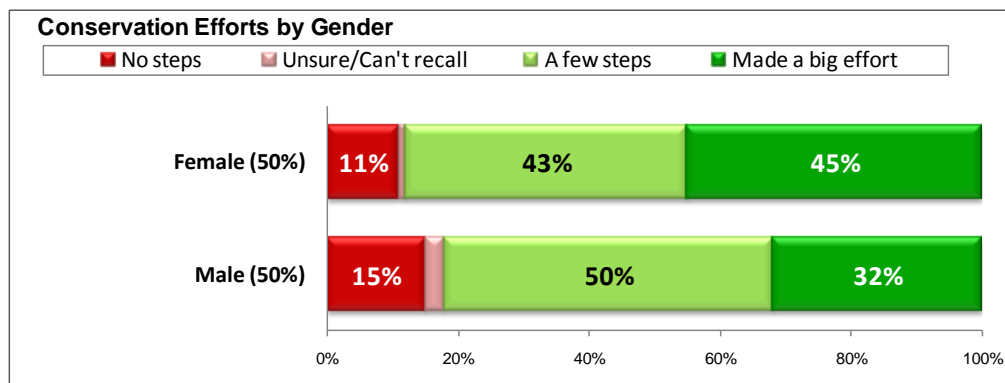
Who is Conserving Water?

Though nearly 40% say they have made a big effort to conserve water, this figure varies substantially based on a number of variables. First, it is clear from the data that the more people believe that water availability is a serious issue, the greater their commitment to water conservation. A whopping 53% of those who see the water availability as extremely serious report making a big effort to curtail water use this summer. Only 5% of that group has done nothing to conserve water. Moving down just one notch on the seriousness scale shows how important the concern is to engendering greater conservation.



Among those who think water availability is only a very serious issue, only 39% have made a big effort to conserve water and, among them, 9% have done nothing. Conservation continues to slide among those who see the problem as only somewhat serious and, among those who say water availability is not an issue at all, a sobering 49% have taken *no steps* to reducing water consumption. Serious water savings will not occur until less concerned residents become more worried about the situation.

Females are more likely to conserve water than males. That is clear from the data as 45% of women have made a big effort to conserve while only 32% of men say they same.



Additional conservation efforts are related to awareness of the SDCWA’s marketing efforts to generate more voluntary conservation. The direct effect (in contrast to the Authority’s ability to instill more concern about water availability among residents) is not large. Though 49% who have heard a lot about the Authority’s call to cut back on water usage have made a big effort to do so, even one-third of those who have not heard the request have made a big effort to conserve water. Clearly, while the Authority’s campaign has helped, it is not the only reason – or even the main reason – people are making an effort to waste less water.

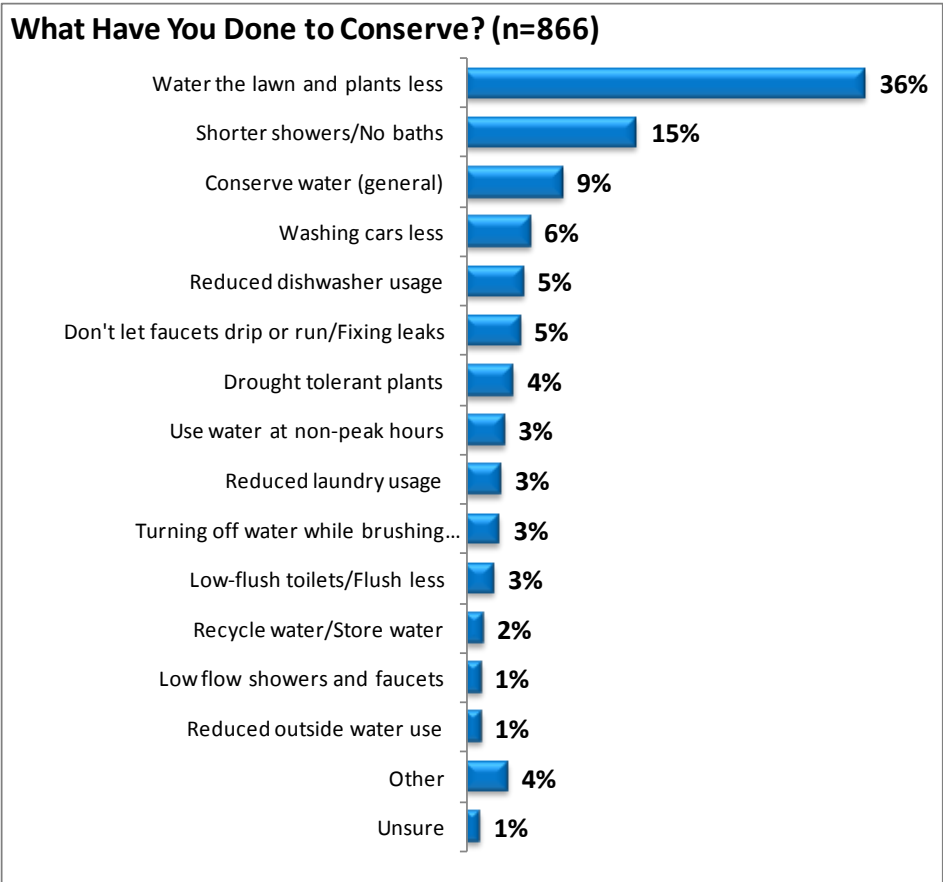
What Have You Done to Conserve?

San Diegans who conserve do so in many ways. Though watering lawns less and taking shorter showers top the list, they are by no means the only approaches.

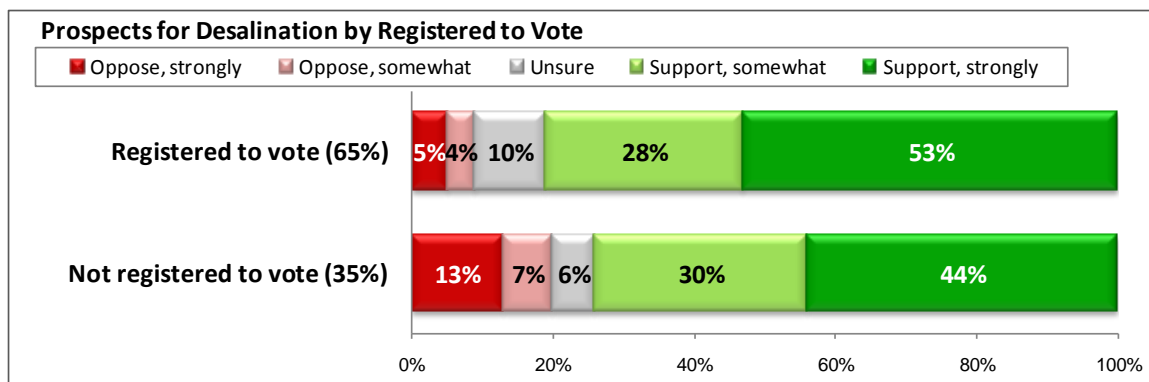
The data shows that more educated, higher income and older residents are more inclined to focus on watering their lawns less. This is likely a reflection that these segments are more likely to own homes with larger lawns. Shorter showers are the conservation method preferred by 18 to 24 year-olds.

Prospects for Desalination

After giving the respondents some background information on the issue of water availability, the survey tested three alternative approaches to confronting the situation from a public policy perspective. Among the three, desalination is currently the preferred approach.



Huge support exists for desalination before any pro or con arguments are made. Support is somewhat stronger among registered voters. “Only” 44% of non-registrants *strongly* support desalination compared to 53% of voters. This clearly gives desalination added political acceptance.



Other groups who, at least initially, tend to support desalination more strongly include whites; Spanish-speaking Hispanics; males; and those who trust government less. On the other hand, we find significantly less support for desalination among those in the south suburbs (National City, Chula Vista, Imperial Beach, San Ysidro and Coronado). Here, “only” 31% strongly support the desalination approach and 22% oppose it.

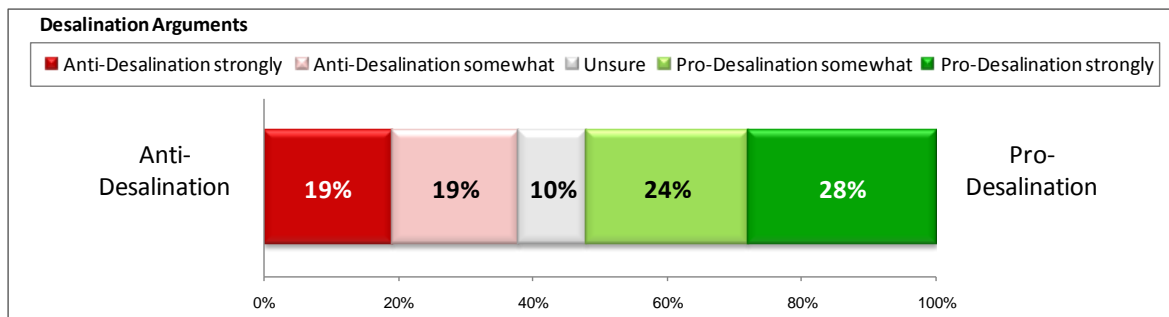
The survey tested support for two positions related to desalination. On one side, the desalination supporter says that:

Since there is a near limitless supply of ocean water along our coast, this would be an easy and cost effective way of adding to the region’s drinking supply. The technology is used around the world and it means that we would not have to build more dams or rely as much on water imported from other areas.

The opponent says that:

The pumps and intake systems kill a huge number of ocean animals and damage the coastal environment. Desalination plants use a large amount of electricity and will reduce the public’s access to the coast. It is also one of the most expensive ways to increase our water supply.

The statements were rotated so as not to give one statement prominence. In this situation we find that most residents agree with the proponents’ position with 52% taking that side and 38% taking the side of the opponents. To be sure, this is a big step down from the initial reading on desalination and indicates that opinions are far from entirely settled on the issue. But, on balance, residents like the desalination concept.

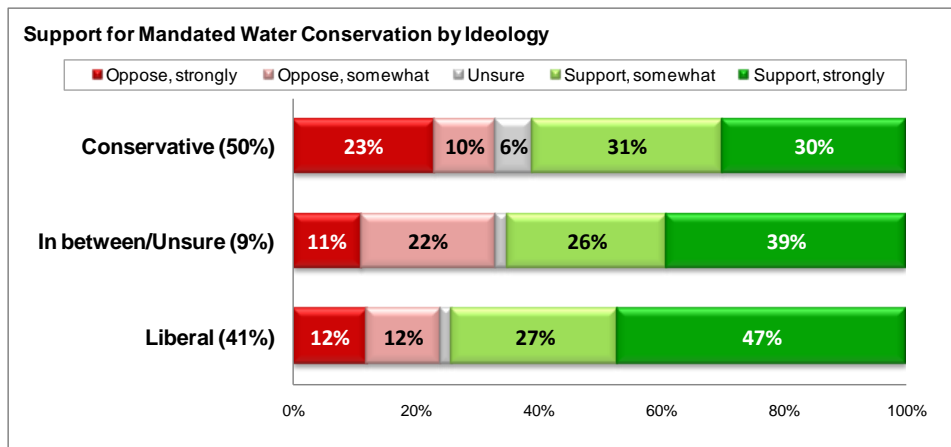
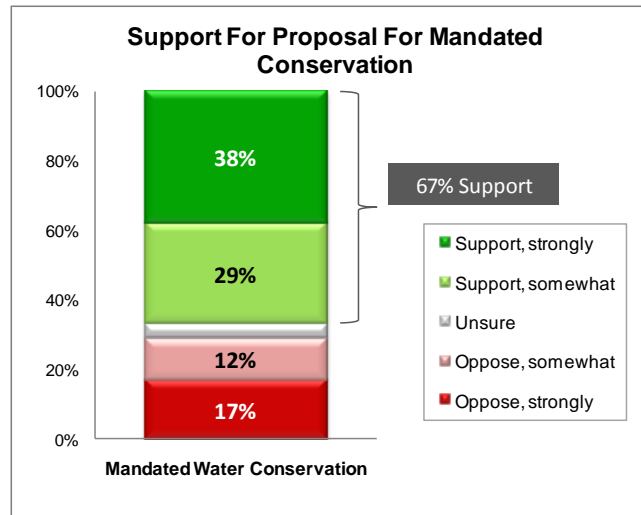


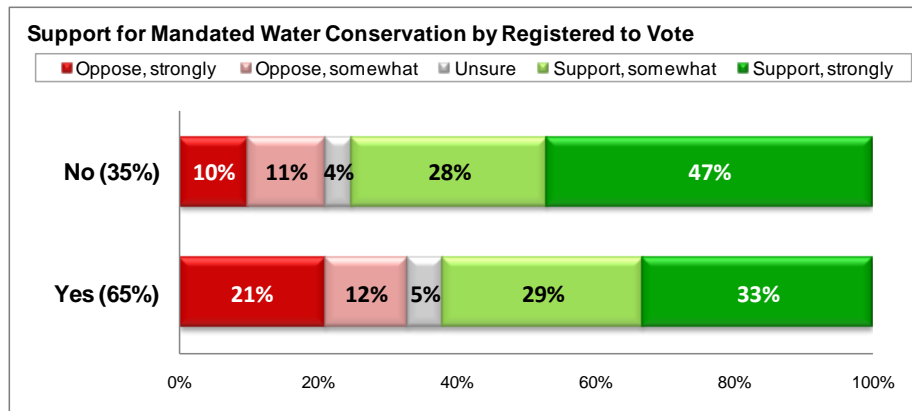
Prospects for Mandated Water Conservation

Most residents also support adopting laws which would force cut backs on water usage and encouraging conservation through higher prices. Though not as strongly supported as desalination, this approach initially meets with the approval of two-thirds of County residents.

Twenty-nine percent oppose mandated water conservation and these folks tend to be ideological conservatives and middle-aged

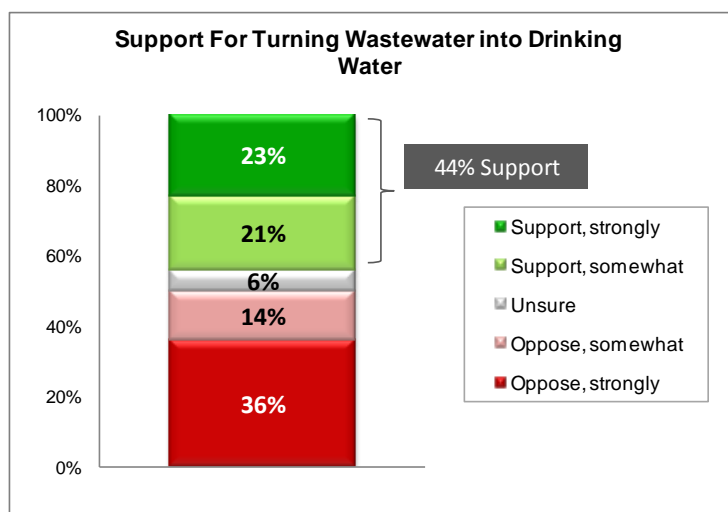
Republicans who are not comfortable with government instituting controls on water. However, even among conservatives, opposition only reaches 33% and among the smaller group of middle-aged Republicans opposition is at 42%. So, even within these two groups, support for mandated water conservation is over 50%. Dovetailing with these findings is the observation that those who trust local government less tend to be a little less likely to support mandated water conservation. But when it comes to registered voters, we support is a bit less intense among them, as 33% strongly support mandated conservation and another 29% somewhat support it.



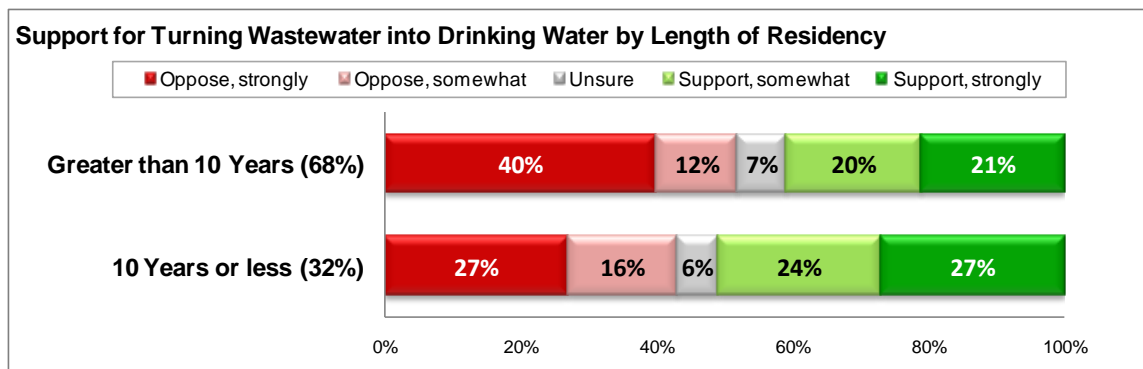


Prospects for Turning Wastewater into Drinking Water

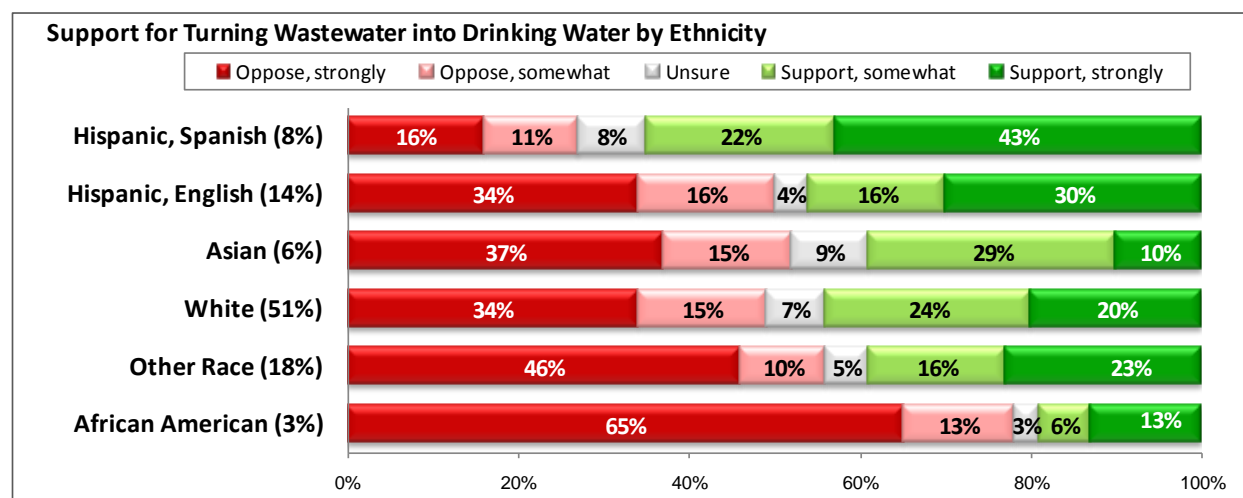
Residents are initially divided on the question of whether to treat wastewater to drinking water standards so that it would be drinkable. However, since 50% oppose this approach and only 44% support it, there is clearly less support for it compared to desalination and mandated conservation.



The data suggest that the prospects for this proposal are somewhat a prisoner of the 1990’s debate over “toilet-to-tap.” It is fascinating to find that the best predictor of whether a resident supports or opposes this approach is how long they have lived in the County. Newcomers, though not exactly embracing wastewater treatment, are far more open to it. In fact, 51% of those with less than a decade in the County say they support it, though that support is not too solid. But among residents who were here for the debates over turning wastewater into drinking water, it is a different story. Two-thirds have lived in the County for more than a decade and, among them, 52% are saying “no” to the concept while only 41% support it.



The concept is more supported by Spanish-speaking Hispanics and by middle-aged liberals but heavily opposed by African-Americans. A huge sixty-five percent of African-Americans *strongly* oppose turning wastewater into drinking water.



As with desalination, we tested arguments related to this approach. The results show how powerful the “toilet-to-tap” label is, as well as how “wastewater-to-well water” fans can make gains. First the survey asked respondents to comment about a debate between pro- and anti-wastewater positions. On one side a proponent says:

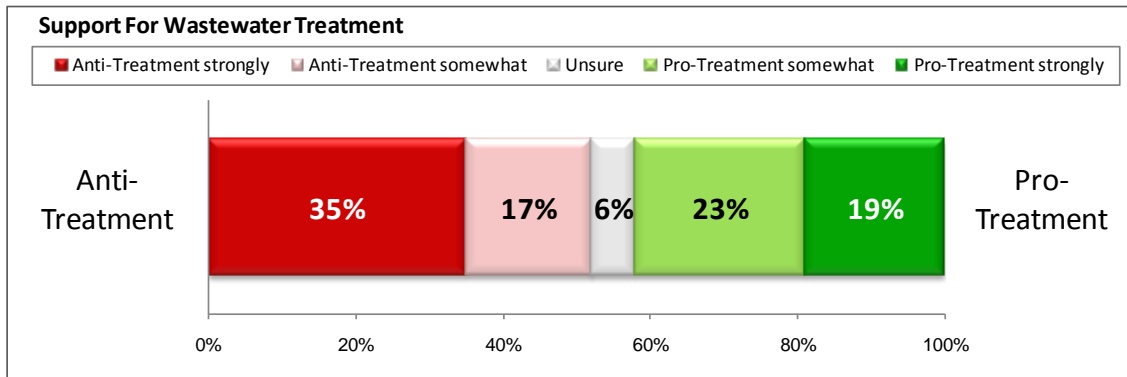
We already treat some of our wastewater to nearly these standards but we waste most of it by dumping it into the ocean. Orange County has been using a very similar process without any problems. Also, the water we import from Northern California has been used before and this

plan is really no different than what we do now. Finally, reusing water is the most environmentally-friendly way of increasing our region’s water supply.

The opposition says:

It may make sense to recycle water for landscaping and outdoor use but it is not safe to use in our homes. Something could go wrong with the treatment plants. Even if this is the most environmentally-friendly way to increase the water supply, wastewater should not be used in this way. He calls this plan “toilet-to-tap.”

In this format, the opponents retain the high ground and even increase their lead by 3%, as 52% side with those opposed to wastewater treatment and only 42% side with the proponents.

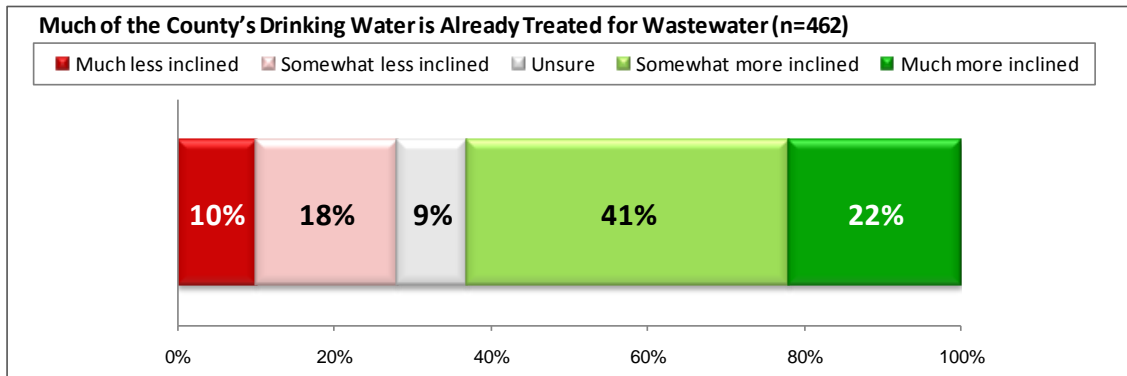


However, the tables turn somewhat when we presented an additional argument to respondents who are not strongly committed to either side:

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 we’re already drinking treated wastewater so why not solve our water supply problems by treating our local water?

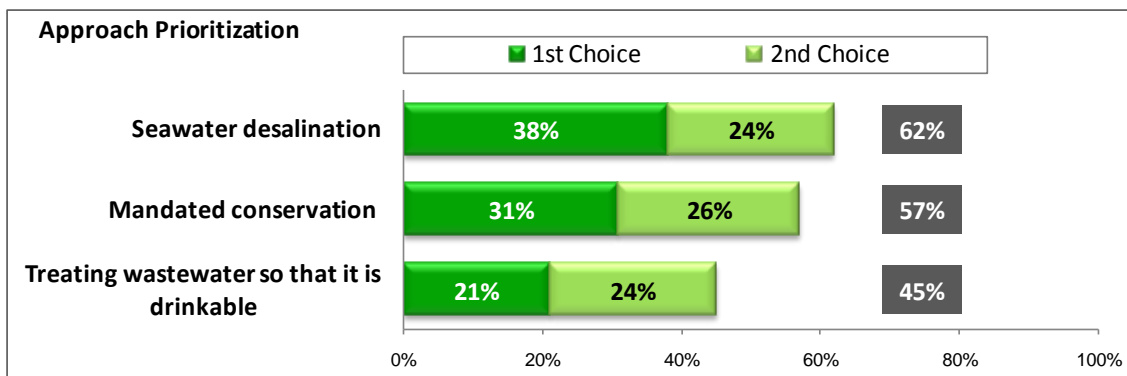
After hearing this argument, 64% of this “swing population” is *more inclined to support* turning wastewater into drinking water. While a survey is a controlled atmosphere and a counter-argument was

not made at this point, the response to this question indicates that wastewater-to-well water supporters have a good argument on their hands.



Solutions to the Water Crunch Prioritized

After the three proposals and related arguments were read, we asked respondents to wrap up by prioritizing the approaches. This reaffirmed the dominance of seawater desalination as the preferred approach, with 38% making it their top choice and, among those who do not select it as their top choice, another 24% make it their second choice. On the other hand, treating wastewater so that it is drinkable is at the bottom of the preference list, as only 21% see it as their top choice and 24% name it their second choice. Tellingly, a mere 7% of the respondents say they favor “none of the plans” we discussed, indicating that even the wastewater proposal is not dead-on-arrival. Mandated conservation is clearly in the middle position, with 31% placing it at the top of their list and another 26% putting it second on their list.



Because desalination relies substantially on the private sector and would avoid legal mandates to force conservation, conservative Republicans tend to be some of its biggest champions. In fact, those on the far right loathe mandated conservation so much that the data suggests they would prefer the proposal to turn wastewater into drinking water over that. On the other hand, women and younger residents are significantly less enthusiastic about the prospects of desalination and gravitate more toward conservation measures. For their part, voters elevate desalination a bit further over mandated conservation.