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No Joke: Most Drinking Supplies Flush With "Potty Water"

by [Neena Satija](#) | May 14, 2014 | [28 Comments](#)



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Poor old Wichita Falls.

The city of about 105,000 people has become the butt of late-night **jokes** and the subject of shocked headlines since

officials decided to turn to treated sewer water to fill residents' drinking glasses.

Turns out, though, the joke is on just about everybody else. Because for the large chunk of population that lives downstream from a big city and whose water supply flows through a river, more than a few drops of the water in their glasses was probably once in someone else's toilet.

Let's start with Houston, which, as Texas State University professor Andy Sansom says, "has been drinking Dallas' crap for decades." Wastewater from Dallas and Fort Worth is deposited

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into the Trinity River, where it flows down into the lakes that supply Houston residents. The wastewater is so clean that it's credited with helping the Trinity River stay strong during recent years of severe drought.

San Antonio's wastewater — which flows through the city's famed Riverwalk in times of drought — is considered valuable, too. Recently, the San Antonio Water System applied for a permit to ensure complete ownership over that wastewater, which is currently deposited into the San Antonio River and is so clean that it helped bring back species some thought were gone from the area forever.



The Guadalupe-Blanco River Authority balked at the application, saying its own customers — farmers, manufacturers and, you guessed it, South Texas city residents — rely on that wastewater. It is so important to the authority that it's taking legal action against the San Antonio Water System's permit.

No one involved in the brewing court battle over who owns San Antonio's wastewater is calling it "potty water," as the Fort Worth Star-Telegram did in a recent story about the Wichita Falls plan.

There are a few other things to be clear about regarding the multimillion-dollar project planned in Wichita Falls. Wastewater reuse in Wichita Falls has been in the works for years and would have happened with or without the drought. It was fast-tracked as the city deals with reservoirs that are only 25 percent full today. In addition, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality — not known for being a particularly strict regulating agency — is currently on the defensive for delaying the city's project by asking for more testing.

Several other Texas cities — San Antonio, Austin and Fort Worth among them — have been looking at such water reuse projects for decades, and some are hoping the plans might come to fruition in the coming years. Across Texas, treated wastewater is being used for everything from watering golf courses to making silicon chips.

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Yet judging by the headlines on news reports about the Wichita Falls project, the city's residents could be in for some sort of disgusting surprise.

"Brushing Teeth With Sewer Water Next Step as Texas Faces Drought," read a [Bloomberg News](#) headline. [National Public Radio](#) wrote, "Drought-Stricken Texas Town Turns To Toilets For Water." Most recently, NBC's *Today Show* tackled the topic, with a reporter noting, "Some residents think it's just plain gross."

Bloomberg News noted that many people are concerned about water contamination, comparing the Wichita Falls project to the [example](#) of Oregon water officials flushing 38 million gallons from a reservoir after a teenager urinated into it. "We're not drought-stricken Texas," an official there noted.

On that note, remember all the people guzzling beer and floating in the water out on Lakes Travis and Buchanan, which supply Austin's drinking water. No one is suggesting flushing those bodies of water or implying that residents of the capital city are brushing their teeth with sewer water.

When talking about the yuck factor associated with water reuse projects, people seem to be distraught over the fact that the water would go directly from a sewer treatment plant to the tap. That's the short-term plan in Wichita Falls during this extreme drought. Eventually, the city plans to blend treated sewer water with reservoir water before anyone drinks it — not unlike what happens in other cities.

And the fact is, some of the lakes and rivers that supply water here in the United States can get pretty dirty. The recent horrific [spill](#) in the Elk River from the chemical manufacturing company Freedom Industries that had 300,000 West Virginians afraid to take showers is just one example.

A recent *New York Times* investigation showed that public water supplies nationwide contain [everything](#) from arsenic to radium at higher-than-safe levels. In the Rio Grande, which supplies millions of South Texans and farmers with drinking and irrigation water, raw sewage is dumped in the river from Mexico every day — and water treatment plants either deal with it or [they don't](#), as was demonstrated in a small town near Laredo last fall when residents were forced to boil their water for



three weeks after getting sick from taking showers.

In fact, an exhaustive National Academy of Sciences study of wastewater reuse **concluded** that when it comes to potential pathogens that may be in the water, “the risk from potable reuse does not appear to be any higher, and may be orders of magnitude lower, than currently experienced in at least some current (and approved) drinking water treatment systems.”

No wonder so many cities — **not just in Texas** — are considering direct water reuse as a water supply strategy to quench their thirst.

On *The Tonight Show* recently, host Jimmy Fallon made a **joke** that a lot of environmental advocates, water engineers and city planners across the state have said they think asks a good question.

“A town in Texas just announced a controversial plan to recycle toilet water and use it for drinking water. Dog said, ‘How are you only thinking of this now?’”

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