

Communication – A Key to the Success of Water Reuse Projects

In recent years, it has been largely recognised that urgent actions have to be undertaken in order to ensure the long term sustainability of Europe's water systems and to fully meet the expectations of all European citizens with respect to their water supply and wastewater services.

In this context, there is increased awareness of the importance of well planned and managed water reuse projects as a key ingredient of sustainable environmental solutions to water resource shortage and pollution. However, a growing number of water reuse projects around the world have failed and being abandoned as a direct result of a lack of community confidence in the projects. They include water reuse schemes in Europe, Australia, and the USA (e.g. reuse of wastewater to irrigate recreational parks, lawns, gardens, pastures and edible crops, household toilet flushing and clothes washing). In each case, community misgivings could be attributed, in part, to inadequate communication between water reuse organisations and their stakeholders. Consequently, a well-organised and comprehensive communications programme with stakeholders is essential to any modern water reuse project.

As a part of the EU funded project AQUAREC¹, Australian researchers have recently concluded a study which aimed at providing an understanding of major communication issues to be addressed for successful water reuse operations and efficient means of addressing them. In the process, the authors have established ten key messages that would promote an efficient communication between water reuse organisations and a number of relevant stakeholders.

Briefly, the messages highlighted by the scientists include the following:

1. Water reuse organisations have to earn their good reputation
2. The reuse project has a critical need and clear purpose
3. Reuse water is safe for its intended uses
4. Water reuse helps conserve drinking water supplies
5. Water reuse is beneficial for the environment
6. Water reuse may have significant positive economic impacts
7. Water reuse is preferable to alternative strategies
8. There are specific intended, approved or, appropriate uses of reuse water
9. Water reuse is successfully practised in many other places
10. In the natural global Earth's hydrological cycle, the water is constantly recycled and reused.

These messages are presented in general terms so that they may be widely applicable, but the authors highlight that in many cases, important local issues will prevail and key messages may need to be tailored to specific groups of stakeholders.

Nevertheless, a communication strategy based on these key messages could represent an effective means, for water reuse organisations, to develop an understanding of their stakeholders. It could provide project managers with a clearer picture of the communication strategies required for successful outcomes. It would also help them in determining how and where to best invest a communication budget for the greatest return.

Overall, the authors argue that addressing the above mentioned issues could, over time, establish an informed community that is comfortable with the concept of water reuse, knowledgeable about the issues involved and supportive of the programme to be implemented.

¹ AQUAREC : Integrated Concepts for Reuse of Upgraded Wastewater <http://www.aquarec.org/>

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