

READER

ALL IN FAVOR, SAY GRAY

A proposed law could help Santa Fe's water crisis.

BY MELISSA MCDONALD

While the city and county consider what to do about Santa Fe's over-stressed water supply, some of the relief that our trees and gardens need could soon come from the state of New Mexico. A bill, sponsored by Rep. Mimi Stewart, legalizing gray water use in residential landscapes (HB114) passed unanimously in the New Mexico House of Representatives last week. If the bill passes the Senate (as SB113) and is signed by the governor, the law would be a first, essential step toward the kind of water-sustainability policy that we desperately need.

Generally, gray water means any untreated household wastewater other than toilet waste. Due to legitimate health concerns the bill excludes wastewater from kitchen sinks, dishwashers and "from the washing of material soiled with human excreta such as diapers." This leaves plenty of typical washing machine, shower and bathroom sink water for use in the landscape.

The other excellent news is the bill would eliminate the permitting process for using gray water in a residential landscape—as long as certain best management practices are followed. These "BMPs" include:

1. No more than 250 gallons of gray water is used during a 24-hour period;
2. An overflow system is installed for excess gray water to flow into a sewage system;
3. The gray water storage tank is covered to prevent use by fauna;



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4. The system is sited outside of any "floodway";
5. The system is sited five feet above the water table;
6. Gray water pipes are clearly marked;
7. Such water is only used on site for landscaping, gardening and composting;
8. Such water is not allowed to pond for more than 24 hours;
9. Gray water is never sprayed in the air;
10. Use of gray water also must comply with local ordinances, if any, that are more restrictive.

Since similar legislation is already the law of the land in Arizona, Texas and California and since the bill has support from the Santa Fe Green Party, the Sierra Club, the New Mexico Xeriscape Council, the New

Mexico Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects, the Santa Fe Chamber of Commerce, the Santa Fe Home Builder's Association, the New Mexico Municipal League, the City of Santa Fe and, most recently, Santa Fe County, the bill is likely to become law. But one can never take anything in politics for granted. SB113, sponsored by Sen. Cisco McSorley, must go before the Senate Judiciary Committee and then the full Senate before being sent to the governor.

We are very close to having an excellent opportunity to start using gray water safely and efficiently. Please call the Legislative Council (986-4600) to leave messages for your senators and the governor in support for this common sense legislation.

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