

For Our Water's Sake, Use Water Softener Alternatives

Opinion by Terry Catlin, Inland Empire Utilities Agency Board of Directors

Protecting water quality and local water supplies is critically important to our region's economic future. This is why, on July 20th, the Inland Empire Utilities Agency – with unanimous support from residents, businesses, environmentalists, local cities and other water and wastewater agencies – adopted a new regional ordinance prohibiting the new installation or replacement of certain residential self-regenerating water softeners – the type to which you add salt and directly discharges brine to the wastewater system.

Residents and businesses in the Inland Empire have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the development of local recycled water and groundwater supplies to drought proof our economy. And it has worked.

In the last ten years, we increased our local water supplies by 50% and reduced our region's dependence on costly and unreliable imported water supplies. When the drought hit – one of the worst water crises in our state's history – our communities were prepared. We supplied recycled water to schools, local businesses and public parkways, pumped additional groundwater, and saved water through conservation programs.

Good news, right? So what is our region's greatest water challenge? Salt! Salt is the single most important constraint on our future ability to use recycled water and groundwater.

That is why our cities and water agencies are so concerned about the use of traditional residential self-regenerating water softeners. These softeners – the type that require the use of bags and bags of salt to make the equipment work -- can contribute up to 30 pounds of salt each month into our community's water treatment system.

That is a pound of salt per day! If the wastewater gets too salty from the discharges from these softeners, it becomes unusable or tremendously expensive (over \$400 million in additional treatment costs) to remove enough salt to make it usable for recycled water and groundwater recharge.

There are alternatives to this one type of water softener that IEUA is regulating. Non-salt using devices are available that protect homes from the effects of hard water. But for residents who still want to have a salt-based softener, there are also professional services that collect the salt canisters (called exchange tanks) and discharge the brine into a separate treatment system -- where the salt belongs—so that the salt never mixes with the region's wastewater or ultimately gets introduced into our groundwater.

What does the new ordinance mean?

- If you have an existing self-regenerating water softener, you can keep it. However, we encourage you to replace it by taking advantage of IEUA's rebate (up to \$2,000) and free professional water softener removal service.
- If you don't have a water softener, and want to consider using this type of device in your home, pick an alternative non-salt using technology or go to a professional water softener exchange canister service.

Our local industries and large commercial businesses are already working hard to keep salt out of our recycled water and groundwater. We all need to do our part. Our region's future water supplies depend upon it!