Greater Pensacola Chamber

2020 Candidate Questionnaire

ECUA

1. How would you rate the water quality in Escambia County?

ECUA water is drawn from the Sand and Gravel Aquifer through 35 waters, maximum, although all are never in use at the same time. Quality of the raw water varies from well to well. Overall, I rate the quality of potable water--that is, water supplied as drinking water--provided by ECUA as Excellent to Good.

(Please keep in mind that there are several other providers of potable water, both (a) "rural" water co-ops, such as Farm Hill Water Works and Gonzalez Utilities, and (b) one for-profit corporation, Peoples Water Co. I cannot comment on them.)

The quality of water produced by local water systems--and all water systems are local--is regulated by federal and state governments through the setting of water-quality standards called "maximum contaminant levels," or MCLs. Dozens of water contaminants are regulated by MCLs. In addition, ECUA has imposed comparable restrictions on itself with regard to additional contaminants that have not been regulated by federal and state governments, such as PFOA and PFOS.

All raw water has at least trace elements of MCLs. Surface waters are much more contaminated than underground waters, typically, and ECUA water is drawn from an underground source, the Sand and Gravel Aquifer. This aquifer water is relatively shallow and therefore is relatively contaminated in the south end of the county, where ECUA's service and its wells are concentrated.

Even so, two-thirds of ECUA's 35 wells produce raw water in which contaminants are present only in concentrations well below all MCLs. I would call the water from these wells "excellent" water.

The remaining one-third of ECUA wells produce water with contaminant levels that either exceed or are approaching one or more MCLs. Each of these wells has either been shut down or has its raw water treated by carbon-based filtration, a common practice throughout the USA and other first-world nations. Filtration reduces contaminants to levels significantly below all MCLs, thus rendering that water as acceptable to drink. I would rate the water from those wells as "good," although, in fact, the contaminant levels may be lowered to levels consistent with the water from unfiltered wells.

2. What can be done to improve the water quality in Escambia County?

The quality of ECUA water is good to excellent. Little needs to be done to improve it. Filtration of contaminants is the main solution to improving water quality from existing wells. Second, if the water from a particular well is so contaminated as to approach MCLs, ECUA will stop drawing water from that well.

In the longer run, ECUA water quality may be improved by construction of new wells in locations where the aquifer water is less polluted. This means wells located further north, essentially.

Test wells have already been drilled in the 2000 acres of ECUA's property for the Central Water Reclamation Facility (CWRF) north of Ascend Performance Materials plant. These test wells have revealed that the aquifer water below this property is relatively uncontaminated and is plentiful enough for four or more wells.

At present, ECUA has a plentiful supply of water from existing wells. (You did not ask about water *quantity*.) In terms of quantity, it will be several years before additional wells are needed. When it is needed, the CWRF property will be there to provide both additional water and less contaminated water, when needed.

ECUA water, as delivered to the customer, is good to excellent water. Contaminants, at some concentration levels--even if only as "trace elements"--are present in all water, less so in underground water than in surface waters (rivers and lakes) that are the source of hundreds of water systems in America. My mention of "contaminants" in ECUA water refers to concentration levels that are far below MCLs or that are lowered significantly by the use of filtration.

3. What is your vision for recycling?

My *primary* vision for recycling is to continue doing what ECUA is doing already. ECUA's collection of recyclables and diversion of them from landfilling has been a success in every way.

Our recycling program, although voluntary rather than mandatory, has a participation rate approaching 75 percent. This is a high participation rate by national standards, and probably exceeds the actual participation rate in many so-called mandatory programs.

A second criterion by which to judge a recycling program is the contamination rate in the recyclables collection. ECUA's contamination rate is satisfactory (although it always could be improved). By comparison, the contamination rate of the City of Pensacola is about twice that of ECUA.

A third criterion by which to judge a recycling program is its financial balance sheet. In the case of the ECUA recycling program, the large financial benefit is the avoidance of tipping-fee charges at Perdido Landfill. This cost avoidance totals about $1 million annually. Because of that cost reduction, ECUA's sanitation customers pay about $1 million less annually for the total package of sanitation services (garbage, recycling, yard debris, and other pickups).

In addition to its recycling *collection* program, ECUA operates the Materials Recycling Facility (MRF), a plant for the sorting and baling of recyclable materials and for selling them to national and international markets. The MRF, too, has been quite successful since its opening in 2016. It is not expected that a MRF should make a profit, and ECUA's MRF has not done so. However, it *has* operated on close to a break-even proposition, so that the net cost has been small. This has been true even though the bottom fell out of the market for recyclables two years ago when China and India stopped taking large portions of total American recyclables. Today, American companies have taken advantage of the opening left by China and India and have built facilities for buying and reusing recyclable materials that previously were going to Asia. Prices for ECUA's recyclable materials have benefited significantly from this change.

Over time, prices for recyclable materials vary from a low of about $40 per ton to a high of about $140; at present, they sit near the middle of that range. At times, ECUA's MRF will lose money; at other times, it will make a modest profit; and, much of the time, it will operate on more or less of a break-even basis. The benefit of the MRF is not its operating net profit or loss, but the fact that it makes it possible for ECUA (and thirteen other governmental jurisdictions in three states) to recycle in a cost-effective manner. Before the MRF was built, ECUA was having to haul its recyclables collection, first, to Atlanta, and, second, to Montgomery.

My *secondary* or *long-range* vision for recycling at ECUA is to add an Advanced Mixed Waste Processing Facility (AMRF). Most people in 2020 do not know that the original name of the MRF was the *Interim* Materials Recycling Facility, or IMRF. This name may still be found in documents from 2015-16. The hope at that time was that an AMRF would be built that would process ECUA's *garbage* stream into fuel pellets, to be sold and/or to be used as fuel in the drying of ECUA wastewater sludge at the ECUA's Central Water Reclamation Facility.

The vision of this second facility was strong in 2015-16--so strong that the property leased to ECUA by the County Commission at Perdido Landfill was (is) large enough to provide the necessary space for an AMRF beside the current MRF. That vision has dimmed; ultimately, however, I do believe that ECUA, in cooperation with the County Commission, will have an AMRF. The primary social benefit would be (a) reduced cost of garbage disposal and (b) the end of large-scale landfilling of garbage.