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Automatic water softeners

Water: Trade in your old 'illegal' water-softening equipment and receive a rebate in the process

Can you bounce a quarter off your water?

Well, of course not. (Maybe you could skip one, but that is beside the point.) The issue is "hard water." Many people don't like it.

It can dry your skin, clog your pipes and require the use of much more soap or detergent to get the same "clean" than soft water does.

Beyond that, many people don't like the taste of hard water, and it leaves spots on things.

Many areas of the SCV have what can be considered hard water, or at least water harder than what folks were used to before they moved here. Consequently, many residents of the SCV want to soften their water.

In the past, they accomplished this, for the most part, by using automatic, or self-regenerating, water softeners. But that is no longer allowed — and it all has to do with chloride from these softeners getting into the Santa Clara River.

Measure S, which was approved by local voters on Nov. 4, 2008, and took effect Jan. 1, 2009, banned the use of automatic water-softeners in the SCV.

Specifically, the ban applies to all homes in the Santa Clarita Valley Sanitation District, which means all homes in the SCV that are connected to the district's sewer system.

There was a six-month "voluntary" ban on the use of automatic water-softeners after Jan. 1, 2009, but since that time (last June) it is a misdemeanor to use them, and if you do, you are subject to a \$1,000 fine or 30 days imprisonment or both.

So, using an automatic water-softener in the SCV is against the law. However (and shiiiiish, keep this on the down-low), you can still get a rebate to have your old automatic water softener removed. That's if it was purchased before the ban went into effect, said Preeti Ghuman, the civil engineer who manages the Measure S rebate program. While the rebate is smaller since the ban went into effect, you can still get 75 percent of the "reasonable value" of your water softener back when they cart it away. Call (877) CUT-SALT (288-7258) for more information.

Be assured that the use of "exchange tank" water softeners is OK. And, for those who need the explanation, here is the difference:
Automatic water-softeners periodically flush their tanks with brine, and when

they do, the chloride from the brine goes into the sewer system, and from there to the Santa Clara River, where it can cause a host of problems. The water treatment plants that purify the water along the way to the river are not set up to remove the chloride. To set them up to do that would be very expensive, estimated at about \$70 million.

With exchange-tank water softeners, the company you rent them from comes out periodically and exchanges the tanks.

The used tanks are taken to locations where they can legally be flushed. There is no use of brine at your home and, hence, no chloride from it entering the sewer system.

So what's the problem with a couple water softeners? Well, it's more than a couple. Guhman said that, to date, there have been 6,750 automatic water-softeners removed in the SCV.

For a little perspective on the water-softener issue I spoke to Michael Alvord, the operations manager at Valencia Water Company.

VWC brings you water, but it is not involved with treatment of water after you use it.

However, as a local company, VWC is very interested in the chloride issue.

Alvord explained that it's the calcium and magnesium in water that makes it "hard" and that the calcium is what causes the most problems. (Surprisingly, he said that although calcium carbonate from hard water can build up in your pipes and clog them, soft water is actually more corrosive to pipes.)

Here in the SCV, the VWC (and other local purveyors) provides water that comes partly from the State Water Project, and partly from local wells. The water project water has much less calcium (measured as calcium carbonate) than the well water.

Alvord said VWC water is about 50-percent state water, which has about 121 milligrams of calcium per liter, and 50-percent well water, which on average, has about 370 milligrams per liter of calcium. Your particular well may put more or less calcium into the mix.

Alvord said that some folks are used to this relative hard- water mix and don't even notice it.

But others don't like it, and have used automatic water softeners to soften things. He explained that resin pellets in the water softeners pull calcium and magnesium out of the water, which reduces the hardness.

However, those pellets eventually become blocked with these minerals and no longer do their job. The brine in a separate tank (either sodium chloride or potassium chloride) is then flushed through the pellet tank.

This strips the calcium and magnesium from the pellets and washes these minerals into the sewer.

It also releases the chloride from the salts into the sewer. It's the chloride that causes the problems downstream.

In an effort to explore alternatives to using water softeners, Valencia Water Company ran a test program on softening water before it got to customers.

A small facility was built and began providing soft water to some residents of the Copperhill area in September of 2008.

This "pellet-softening" system removed calcium from the well water provided to those residents. The result was, and continues to be, "cutting the total hardness by about 50 percent, but cutting the calcium hardness by about 75 percent," Alvord said.

The pellet softening facility uses sand, which eventually becomes coated with calcium carbonate from the water and has to be exchanged. But the resulting calcium carbonate-coated pellets are actually being reused.

"The beauty is these pellets are being reused to make roofing shingles in Riverside," Alvord said.

All of the pellets are reused in this way and the roofing company could use much more. "We can't generate it fast enough," he said.

Alvord noted that VWC was interested in three issues regarding the groundwater softening project.

Would the customers like it? Could it be done at a reasonable price for the customer? Was there a reduction in chloride in the sewer water leaving that community?

"We achieved all the goals," Alvord said.

However, despite the success, expanding the process to other VWC customers will have to wait.

"We figured that if we expanded the treatment plants to serve all of our customers, it would increase the average bill \$5 to \$6 a month," Alvord said.

Considering the troubled economic times, this didn't seem like a good idea. "We're sort of in a holding pattern," he said.

He added that the expansion would have to be approved by the Public Utilities Commission, as well.

"Just because we say we want to do it doesn't mean the PUC will allow it."

If you visit the Valencia Water Company Web site at www.valenciawater.com, you can click on "Salt Free Water Conditioning Alternatives" and view lists of products you can rent or purchase that will soften your water and which are not subject to the ordinance prohibiting automatic water softeners.

You can also click on other topics to get a wealth of information on related subjects. Even more information is available at

www.lacsd.org/info/industrial_waste/chloride_in_santa_clarita/introduction.asp
or www.santa-clarita.com/cityhall/cmo/environment/chloride_water_residential.asp

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