

Reusing Water, Renewing Trust

How Orange County Built Public Confidence for the
World's Largest Water Purification System

The Reclaimers | Jazzmin Awa · Bijay Subedi · Samendra Sherchan · Nikita Kowal · Nick Jenness · Brian Craighead

Mentor: Jon Ruff



This is not an engineering project – it's a PR Project

01

The Challenge

Why potable reuse projects fail, why technical merit alone was not enough and what OCWD faced before a single pipe was laid.

02

Building Trust

The decade long outreach playbook paired with trusted messengers, tours that achieved zero organized opposition and 600+ letters of support.

03

Lessons Learned

Transferable leadership insights for advancing circular water initiatives anywhere in the world.

"This is not an engineering project — it's a PR project."

PART 01

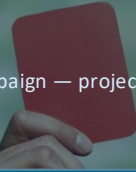
The Challenge

Why do potable reuse projects fail —
and what did OCWD face before construction began?



San Diego (1999)

"Toilet to tap" campaign — project killed by public backlash



Los Angeles (2000)

Councilman opposition — project abandoned



San Gabriel Valley (1996)

Industry lawsuit — project scaled back to non-viability



The Challenge: What OCWD Faced

The Yuck Factor

Only 25% of residents were even aware of the project. Low water literacy made the public highly susceptible to fear-based messaging like 'toilet to tap.'

Toxic Terminology

Industry terms like 'recycled water' triggered rejection. Research showed 83% of residents preferred 'purified water' — a critical finding that changed everything.

Equity Concerns

Prior project failures were fueled by claims that recycled water targeted minority or low-income communities. OCWD had to address this directly and proactively.

The NDMA Crisis

In 2000, a carcinogen was detected in existing water supply. OCWD chose radical transparency — immediate public disclosure — turning potential disaster into a trust milestone.

PART 02

Building Trust

The OCWD outreach playbook — a decade of sustained community engagement that achieved zero organized opposition.

600+ Letters of Support

Zero Organized Opposition

10+ Years of Outreach



Crisis as Trust-Builder: The NDMA Moment

What Happened

Year 2000 — before construction began, OCWD detected NDMA (a carcinogen) in Water Factory 21 injection water.

Levels ranged from <2 to 150 parts per trillion — above California's 20 ppt interim action level.

Two retail agency drinking water wells tested above the threshold and were taken out of service.

OCWD's Response

1. Issued an immediate public press release
2. Established a toll-free public hotline
3. Invited local media to discuss findings directly
4. Simultaneously disclosed the problem AND the solution
5. Added UV/H₂O₂ treatment to the GWRS design specifically to address NDMA

Result: Balanced media coverage. No public outrage. No organized opposition.

PART 03

Lessons Learned

What every circular water leader can take from OCWD's 25-year trust-building journey.

"The only thing that permanently destroys public trust is the perception that information was withheld."



The OCWD Outreach Playbook: A 6-Step Framework

01

Research First

Study best practices, survey the community, identify baseline awareness, safety concerns, key audiences, and preferred language such as "purified water".

02

Plan the Message

Start with water basics. Address health & safety first. Use plain language. Leverage trusted voices: doctors, scientists, community leaders.

03

Engage

Early outreach to elected officials & regulators. Briefed city councils & policy committees. Built trusted champions at every level.

04

Respond

Water 101 workshops, plant tours & tastings, TV appearances, press releases, crisis comms team, brochures & water quality reports.

05

Think Bigger

Speakers Bureau, stakeholder advisory panels, media relations, inclusive multilingual outreach, educational resources — and never stop.

06

Continuing the Commitment

Keep communication open after launch so trust supports future expansions, new issues, and long-term public confidence.

 **Pro Tip:** Before building upward, build understanding. Early outreach lays the foundation for your project's success. The outreach never stops.

The So What

Water is not just a resource. It is a relationship.

OCWD proved that the most advanced water purification technology in the world still requires the most ancient form of infrastructure: human trust.

The Reclaimers | WLI 2026 | Lake Cohort | Team 3

Jazzmin Awa · Bijay Subedi · Samendra Sherchan · Nikita Kowal · Nick Jenness · Brian Craighead

Mentor: Jon Ruff | wli@wef.org



0

Negative news articles
in 16 years of coverage

[Source](#)