



Water: Do we need a label for that?

Water labels on consumer products could encourage conservation.

Author: Klaus Reichardt

Every day we hear about one country or another, including our own, with a water problem. Sometimes it is quite critical, as is in large parts of China today. Other times, there might not be a water shortage, but the infrastructure necessary to move water from one place to another is inadequate. This is becoming very common in the U.S.

But, overriding this is the worldwide threat of serious water shortages in both historically water-rich and water-poor areas. Water scarcity is predicted in many parts of the world, including North America, in the 21st century. Some experts believe that shortfalls will have as much impact on communities, industry and economies as oil shortages did in the 1970s, when people lined up to fill their gas tanks.

Where's the water?

Why is there a greater likelihood of greater water shortages? First and foremost is the growing world population. The world population went from 2 billion in 1927 to 5 billion in 1987, and surpassed 6 billion in 1999. Based on these growth patterns, by 2025, the world's population will be nearing the 10 billion mark.

Although new technologies being developed help world populations conserve water, they may be evolving too slowly and focusing on too few countries to address the challenges. What might prove beneficial is a system that helps everyone — in developing and developed countries — know how much water they are using for everything from flushing a toilet or urinal to growing cotton to making a car.

This would help people quantify how much water they are using in their personal and work lives. This fits in with the famous management adage, “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.” For our purposes, the first step in conserving water, or at least using it more responsibly, is to have some idea of how much we use. And, because most Americans, as well as other people around the world, are wary of government-enforced rationing or controls, having some sense of how much water we use could propel conservation and water-saving technologies on an individual basis.

Following an established model

In the 13th century, the King of England proclaimed what is now considered the first food regulatory law. It prohibited bakers from mixing beans and ground peas into bread dough and required that the bakers provide consumers with some type of system indicating what ingredients were included in the bread.

Voilà! The first food label, the great-great-great-ancestor of the nutritional food labels we see on the back of every food product we use today, was born.

Why not use a similar system on water-using products? In a limited sense, we are doing so already. Many toilets and urinals sold and installed in the U.S. post how many gallons of water per flush (gpf) they consume. For urinals, this is typically labeled on the top of the unit. If the system is a no-water urinal, a sign will

often be posted above the unit indicating the urinal uses no water at all.

But, the important thing to realize is this: The nutritional labeling system, widely used in the U.S. and essentially copied in countries around the globe, already exists and can be used as a model to indicate how much water we use or was used for scores of things. On a more personal basis, individuals could use the information and synchronize it with their handheld computers to calculate how much water they use each day, each week, etc.

In fact, just such a system was recently called for by Dr. Brent Clothier of the New Zealand Institute for Plant and Food Research Ltd. The good doctor urged for the introduction of a water labeling system at the Australian Society of Agronomy conference held at the end of 2010 in New Zealand.

Would water labels help?

Some fast food restaurants, either voluntarily or by regulation, are adding nutritional labels to their menus so consumers have a better idea what is in a hamburger, for example, and how many calories and how much fat it contains. As far as encouraging consumers to choose a salad instead of the high calorie burger, the results have been marginal at best.

However, in 2007, when food manufacturers were required to post on their labels the amount of trans and saturated fats in their products, consumers started looking for alternatives wherever possible. Today, it is estimated that 95 percent of supermarket foods have been reformatted with healthier fats.

Could this apply to water too? What could happen if water labels were posted on many of the things we use and select every day? Would it propel manufacturers to invest more time and energy in research to develop more water-conserving products? This would

be an example of supply and demand at work, which has invariably proved beneficial for the consumer and industry alike.

A frequent speaker and author on water conservation issues, Klaus Reichardt is founder and CEO of Waterless Co. Inc., Vista, Calif. Reichardt founded the company in 1991 with the goal to establish a new market segment in the plumbing fixture industry with water conservation in mind. The company's key product, the Waterless No-Flush urinal, works completely without water and was invented by Reichardt. He is a member of U.S. Green Building Council since 1999 and joined the University of California Santa Barbara EcoEntrepreneur Advisory Board in 2008. He may be reached at Klaus@waterless.com.