WEDC

MOBILE NOTE 61

Re-use of wastewater

Introduction

This mobile note considers situations where it may be appropriate to re-use wastewater for agriculture in arid and semi-arid regions as a means of increasing food production for urban communities. The note also introduces the different types of wastewater re-use scheme.

The note provides a recommended guide to water quality for irrigation, and outlines, using diagrams, the necessary procedures for treating wastewater.

Loughborough University

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Background

In many arid and semi-arid countries, wastewater is becoming an increasingly important source of irrigation water. The demands of growing urban communities for both food and water require the agricultural sector not only to increase food production but also to reduce its use of natural water resources. At the same time the volume of sewage effluent is increasing, and safe disposal can be difficult. The use of reclaimed wastewater for irrigation is the obvious solution, but few people have expertise in the full range of technology involved.

When to re-use wastewater

There are several questions to consider:

What are the water requirements of the community?

Many communities in most developing countries do not have reliable access to supplies of clean water. As the demand for water increases, making

more efficient use of water becomes more important. Water re-use should be seriously considered before water availability is matched by water demand (Figure 1).

Note that not all water needs to be treated to potable standards. Most wastewater re-use is informal and goes largely unrecognized by the public and by many professionals.

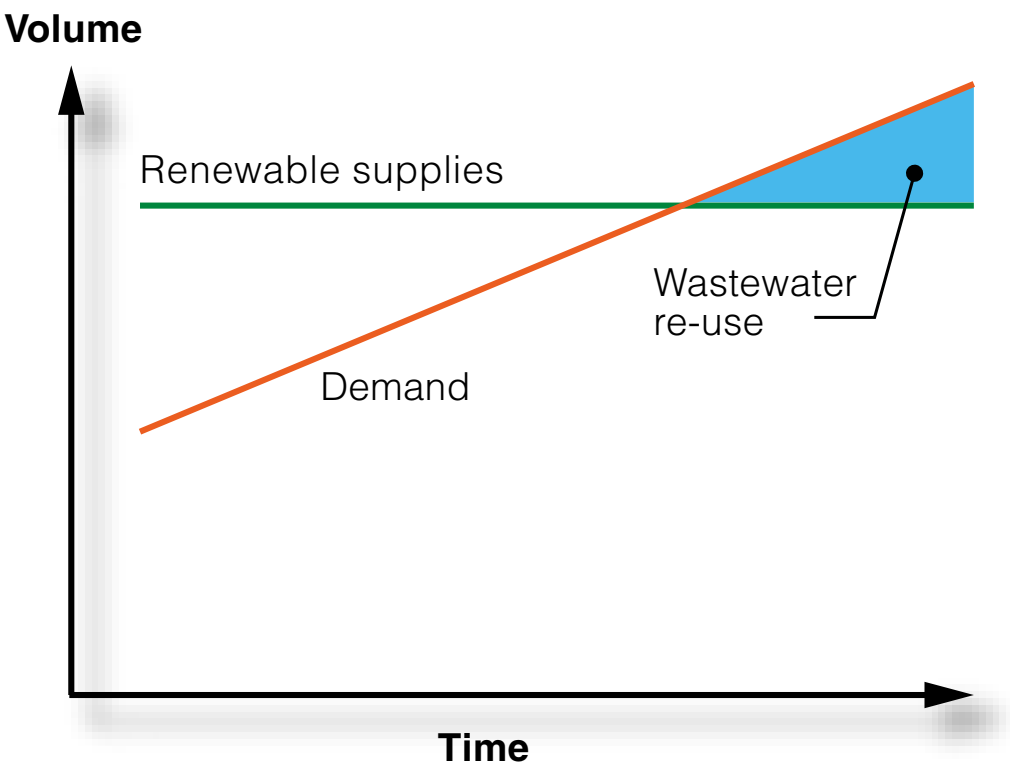

Figure 1. Water availability and demand

Is the content of the wastewater harmful?

Wastewater may contain chemicals which are harmful to the growth and development of plants. It may also contain bacteria and other organisms which are harmful to agricultural workers and to those who handle, cook, or eat the plants. Wastewater may even contain bacteria and other organisms which, when eaten by animals, may in turn infect the people who eat the contaminated meat. Figure 2 examines the health risks in relation to the level of contamination and the re-used wastewater control measures.

Figure 2. Wastewater re-use: control methods and health risks

What will the wastewater be used for?

It is important to first consider which water uses are the major ones, and efforts should then be made to be more

economical in these sectors. Industry and agriculture require large volumes of water, but the quality need not always be high. Water demands for irrigated agriculture are considerable. (For example, since 1949 agricultural water consumption in Israel has ranged from 71.3 to 83.3 per cent of the total water consumption.)

Is it economical to re-use wastewater?
The costs of treating the wastewater adequately as opposed to using conventional water resources should be carefully considered and the more economical option chosen.

Types of wastewater re-use schemes: direct or indirect

Direct re-use is the planned and deliberate use of treated wastewater for some beneficial purpose, including drinking.

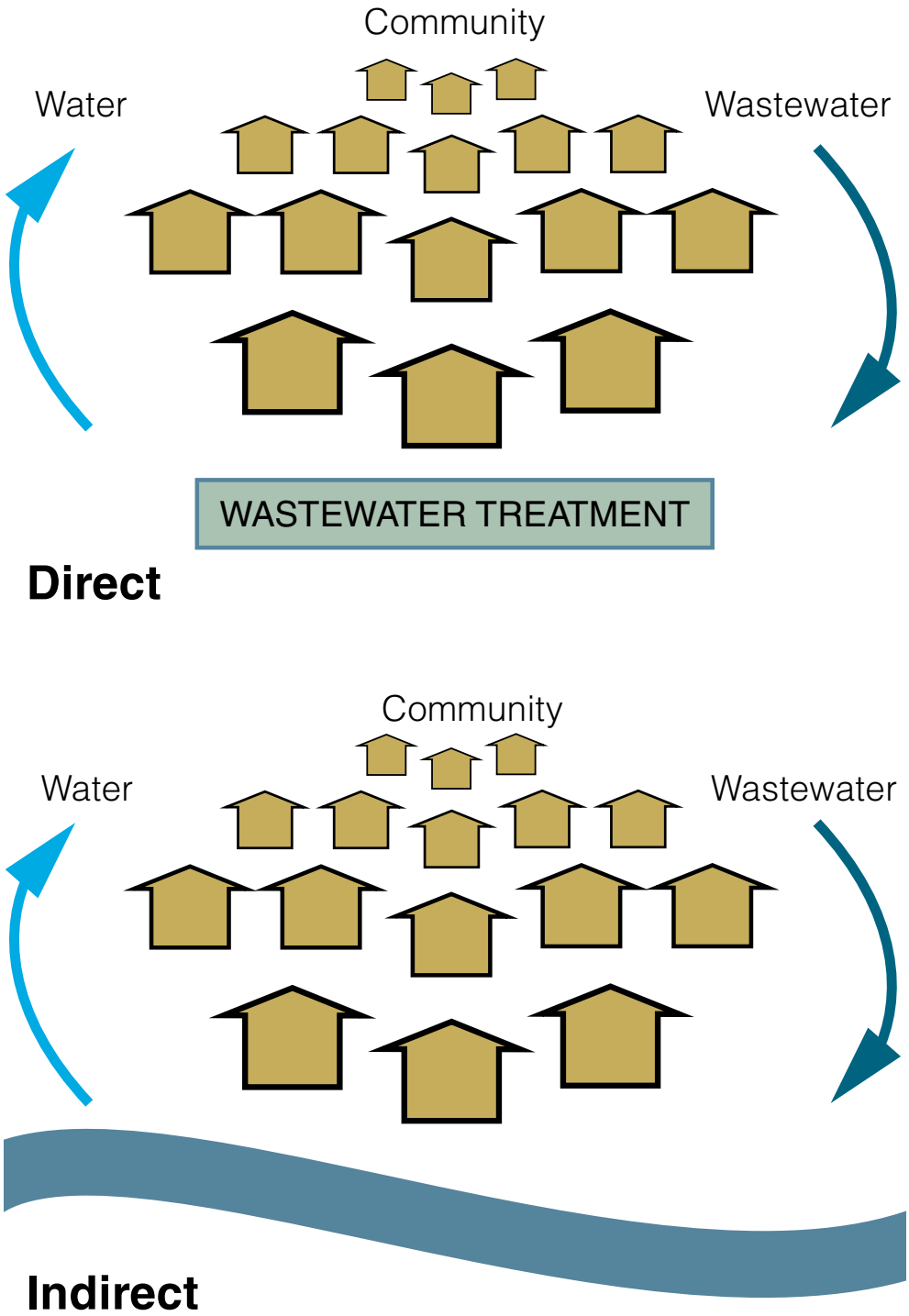

Figure 3. Direct and indirect wastewater schemes

Direct potable re-use is not popular and is limited to a few places including Windhoek in Namibia and Denver in the United States. It is generally unacceptable to the public because of both the expense and the attitudes of the community.

Studies have shown that people will drink wastewater from an indirect source unless there is evidence to suggest that it is unsafe to do so. People will not, however, drink water from a direct source unless it is proven to be safe.

Indirect re-use refers to water that is taken from a river, lake, or aquifer which has received sewage or sewage effluent.

Figure 4. Recommended quality of water for irrigation

Figure 5. Procedure for treating wastewater

Further points to consider

- Studies in South America, Asia, and the Middle East have shown that farmers prefer to grow produce in the following order of priority:

    1. Vegetables (to earn a regular income);
    2. Fruit (to earn a regular income or foreign exchange);
    3. Cereal crops (of lower value);
    4. Fodder crops (of low value);
    5. Other crops for which there is a demand (herbs, spices, flowers, etc.)

- The re-use of wastewater for irrigation has been most successful near cities, where wastewater is easily available and where there is a market for agricultural produce.

- The storage of treated wastewater may be necessary, because supply may not match demand (Figure 6).
- Re-use requires:
  - careful planning;
  - adequate and suitable treatment;
  - careful monitoring;
  - appropriate legislation; and
  - the implementation of legislation and quality standards.

Conclusions

- Re-use can help to maximize the use of limited water resources.
- Wastewater re-use can contribute to national development.
- Environmental damage caused by re-use should be minimized.
- Health risks associated with re-use should be minimized.
- Collaboration between users, authorities, and the public is needed.

- Exchange of experiences is very important.
- Government support and encouragement is needed.

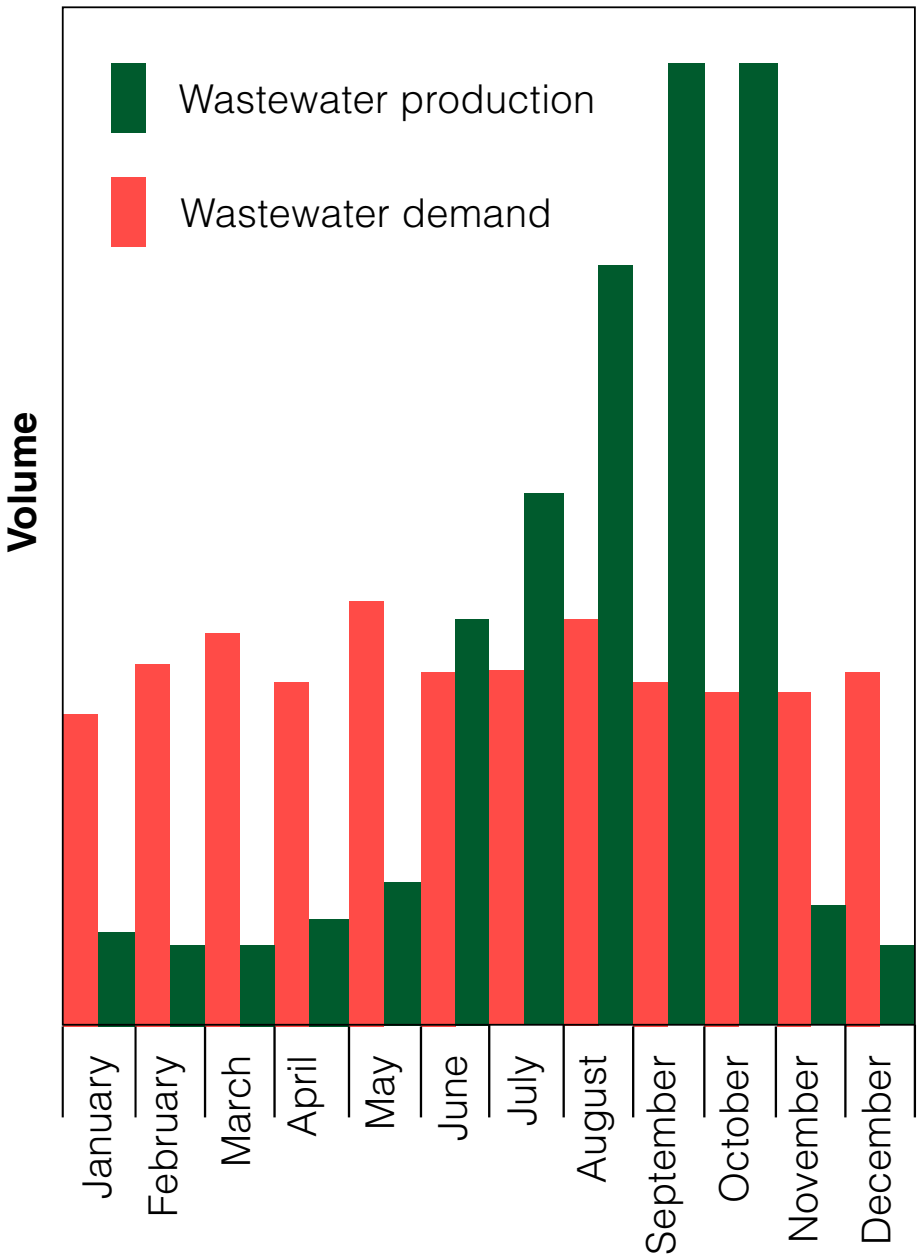

Figure 6. Wastewater production and demand during one year

Further reading

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WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 1989, *Health Guidelines for the Use of Wastewater in Agriculture and Aquaculture*, Report of WHO Scientific Group, Technical Report Series No. 778. Geneva: WHO.

About this note

Author: Mike Smith
Illustrator: Rod Shaw

Designed and produced by WEDC

Water, Engineering
and Development Centre (WEDC)
School of Civil and Building Engineering
Loughborough University
Leicestershire LE11 3TU UK

Phone: + 44 (0) 1509 222885
Email: wedc@lboro.ac.uk
Website: wedc.lboro.ac.uk
Twitter: wedcuk
YouTube: wedclboro

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