



OPINION, Bob Walker: H2GO RO plant has always been right strategy

By Bob Walker | For StarNews Media

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Recently, readers of the StarNews and residents of our entire region woke up to the shocking story that a toxic chemical called GenX was not just in their source water, the Cape Fear River, but in their drinking water.

While it is important to provide perspective and reinforce the fact that all of the water being provided by H2GO, Brunswick County Public Utilities, CFPUA and other utilities meets or exceeds current state and federal drinking water standards, we understand the alarm such a discovery can cause.

While the news certainly grabbed everyone's attention, the issue of unregulated contaminants has owned the water industry's attention for years; GenX is simply the latest chemical being found in parts per billion and trillion amounts by today's advanced testing.

What this latest discovery means for those of us who work in the water business is that our regulators must continue to plow forward with scientific review and establish appropriate standards for utilities so we can ensure we are continuing to protect public health.

That is what all of us who work in water are about. Protecting public health. Producing and delivering safe, clean water to your homes and businesses is job one. Failing to fulfill this duty shakes the public's confidence in a basic human need, resulting in a dramatic disruption in our community's overall quality of life.

Since the mid-1980s, H2GO and its predecessors have delivered safe, clean water to the people of northeastern Brunswick County. During the past decade, it became clear to the management and then-customers of H2GO that the future demands on, and threats to, our water supply demanded attention and action.

Back then, we believed development would rapidly increase in the area, placing pressure on the supply. That belief became reality. At the same time, activists and water professionals became united in their view that the Cape Fear River is an endangered resource due to unregulated contaminants. Unfortunately, that belief was confirmed as reality again last week.

It's just one reason why, in 2011, H2GO and its customers began our effort to provide an unquestionably secure supply of drinking water through the construction of a reverse osmosis (RO) water treatment plant with deep-well groundwater supplies. For years, the planning moved forward without a hitch because it was clear to all, including respected independent third parties, that we had done our homework and prepared properly for construction.

In the last couple of years, a concerted effort has been made to block the plant by playing to emotion instead of logic. "The plant is too expensive! We can get water cheaper! We don't need it!" No, actually, esteemed auditors confirmed that the plant will not only keep H2GO's rates stable, it will save our customers money for years to come.

"But H2GO is financially unstable! They can't say that!" Actually, H2GO can. The UNC School of Government's Environmental Finance Center gives H2GO its highest marks in all seven of its financial benchmark categories. Their online dashboard showcasing our performance is awash in green, the color of Go.

"The plant is environmentally dangerous!" No, actually, a team of respected professors from UNCW and longtime water regulators unequivocally stated the plant is environmentally sound and the state has already given H2GO its approval for our permit for discharge to the Brunswick River.

Every single charge from the opposition has been easily and clearly refuted by experts in their various fields. When they lost the ability to attack the plant on its merits, opponents have pushed for delays in continuing our six years of work until after an election.

That's the same political-based call that we hate hearing yelled from Washington or Raleigh. It forces a fully formed and proven successful project to fight for its life because a vocal minority can't get its way.

Hopefully the GenX news of the last week will lead opponents to reconsider their misguided tactics, especially since the alternate ground water source will eliminate H2GO's dependence on the vulnerable Cape Fear River.

This unregulated contaminant is just the latest reason why the construction of the RO plant is right and proper. It will not only protect the pocketbooks of H2GO's customers, it will protect their health.

Bob Walker is executive director of the Brunswick Regional Water & Sewer H2GO.