

Dishwater, Dahlias, and Illegal Reuse: A Case Study on Gray Water Regulations and a Push for Change in North Carolina

Presenters: Trina Ozer and Henrietta Locklear, AMEC Earth and Environmental, Inc.,
trina.ozier@amec.com, henrietta.locklear@amec.com,

Co-author: Keith Reading, PE, VP, AMEC Earth and Environmental, Inc., keith.readling@amec.com

Last fall, rain continued to be eerily scarce in North Carolina and after nearly eighteen months of blue skies, water supplies had dwindled to historic lows. Many local governments responded by imposing restrictions on water use, but many citizens felt those restrictions were insufficient, and they made attempts to conserve water even beyond those restrictions. One way to do so is reusing gray water, or potable water that has been used once in a bathtub, shower, or laundry machine, for a second use such as flushing toilets or watering lawns. But in North Carolina, those who tried to conserve water by reusing gray water hit a wall: state building codes prohibit the use of gray water without treating it first. A treatment system is not commonly available in most homes, but even for those who bought and installed a system ran into another problem. Under current North Carolina law, even treated gray water can only be used for flushing toilets – not for watering plants. Presumably, hardcore conservationists simply flouted the law, and continued to water their pansies with dirty dishwater. However, some saw the need for a change in the regulation that prevented them from participating in an easy and effective way to conserve water in a time of scarcity. This paper is a case study of North Carolina's response to one form of water conservation during the worst drought in state history: the illegality of gray water use. Our analysis examines whether the stars in North Carolina aligned well enough for State law to change.