

WATER TECH MAKING A SPLASH

The San Diego region depends on outside sources for much of its water and the current drought has been cause for concern throughout California. **The emerging water technology industry could provide solutions to water problems regionally and worldwide.** Here, the former chairman of a local water policy task force and a technology consultant make the case for San Diego to be a hub for water-related companies.

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The drought is impacting the San Diego region's \$200 billion economy. Biotech companies, farmers and real estate developers are concerned about the effects of water shortages.

This growing crisis presents an opportunity. As a region with serious water vulnerability, but also with extraordinary resources, San Diego is well positioned to take the lead in water technology.

The San Diego economy is diversifying. A generation ago, it relied most heavily on the military, real estate and tourism. Those remain significant sectors, but biotechnology, information technol-

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ogy and academic institutions have surged in prominence, and new industries such as craft beer breweries are gaining acclaim. *Forbes* magazine last year named San Diego as the top area in the nation for startup companies.

Yet, other than the outside presence of the Navy and Marine Corps, San Diego has never been a regional or national center of any industry. Few Fortune 500 companies have been headquartered here, and we have never been home to high-profile industries like filmmaking or finance. But the presence today of so many technology companies, coupled with academic research institutions and a growing venture capital sector, presents an opportunity.

The region is still highly dependent on outside water resources, notwithstanding important recent investments by the San Diego County Water Authority and ambitious plans for the city of San Diego. The drought has highlighted this. It is further underscored by how dependent some of our key growth industries are on a reliable water supply.

A diverse nucleus of water technology com-
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panies already is active here. Growing interest in recycling wastewater to reduce water imports has companies like Aquatech International and Hydronautics developing new filtration and treatment technologies. While seawater desalination remains controversial for its energy demands and environmental impacts, firms such as RMA Group are working to improve the quality of the technology, and San Diego is hosting an international desalination conference in a few months. Underground Solutions is addressing increasing the life of water distribution systems and avoiding water line breaks. Greywater Recycling Systems is facilitating reuse of drain water for irrigation.

There are firms applying information advances to the water field. The Smart Water Assets developed by Qualcomm and featured in the U.S. Commerce Department's 2015 Global Cities Challenge provide sensors and software to improve water quality and better manage water systems. Schmidt Design Group has been a pioneer in efficient landscape and irrigation designs.

Given San Diego's great thirst for improvements in its water supply and water quality conditions, water-related companies currently operating elsewhere have reasons to locate here. Ecoblu and others are advancing water-from-air technologies, driven in part by the interest of the armed services in advancing water independence for troops in the field and aboard ships. From Mexico to Israel, companies making breakthroughs in water recycling, water conservation and water infrastructure management are looking at this region as a fruitful place to do business.

Several steps should be taken to support and expand this economic sector:

The water technology companies already here should form an informational and promotional network to create a distinct identity for themselves and attract others to invest and locate here. Institutions such as the Regional Economic Development Corporation and the Chamber of Commerce should support that effort and help leverage national interest in water innovation. At the same time, the city of San Diego and other interested jurisdictions should promote the identity of this region as the national center of water-related technology, with the goal of creating a water counterpart to Silicon Valley.

Finally, the region's universities, along with major technology companies, should collaborate in developing a Water Innovation Center, to stimulate research and development in cutting-edge technologies.

We have strong local models to build on. CONNECT has been promoting technology startup businesses for more than 20 years. Cleantech San Diego has drawn businesses into the energy efficiency and renewable energy fields. The Maritime Alliance is an important advocate for ocean-related enterprises.

Now, to boost our economy, generate large numbers of high-paying jobs, take our existing technological resources to a new plateau, increase our capability to address our water needs and elevate our region in the eyes of the rest of the world, it is time to focus on making San Diego the national center of water technology innovation.