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PBPA panel discusses next steps in produced water management

By **Mella McEwen**, *Oil Editor*

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An oilfield worker silhouetted against the sky.
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While all major oil and gas producing basins have produced water, none deal with the volumes of water seen in the Permian Basin.

What to do with those volumes has become even more challenging as oil and natural gas production has climbed to record highs, generating even more water to be managed. Intensifying those challenges has been the rise in seismic activity due to water injection and efforts to limit seismicity has limited disposal options.

Still, the three experts discussing produced water agree research and technological advancements in treating, recycling and reusing produced water have the industry on the cusp of addressing the challenges.

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“We have chased every possible use for that water,” Robert Crain, executive vice president at Texas Pacific Water Resources, said during the panel discussion at the Permian Basin Petroleum Association’s annual meeting this week. “We have to find a technology that makes treatment and reuse economic.”

He added that any technology needs to have a commercial component and needs to be comparative to other uses, such as disposal.

Distilling produced water has been looked at and done in the nation’s oil fields for years, noted Rick McCurdy, vice president, innovation and sustainability at Select Energy.

He went on to point out that until just several years ago, producers were convinced only fresh water could be used to hydraulically fracture wells before realizing treated produced water was just as effective. Anything to reduce the use of fresh water and have it available for residents is important, he said.

Whitney Dobson, chief operating officer at Infinity Water Solutions, observed there are two paths as the industry seeks to move towards beneficial reuse of produced

water – something she described as a very broad term.

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“We need to bring in industries with a higher price point or we need to pipe it to areas that need water,” she said. Dobson noted there are Permian Basin regions studying ways to bring in agriculture or industrial companies that could purchase that produced water.

“Now we’re ready for that next step, (but) we need guidelines on standards for irrigation use and discharge,” said McCurdy. “The ball is rolling and it’s rolling in the right direction.”

He said state agencies have been working with industry not only on easing regulations to allow recycling of water but in taking steps to develop those guidelines, and federal agencies are also beginning to join the effort.

Crain said the industry now needs to begin pivoting from pilot programs to field-scale projects and also needs that framework as it increases capacity.

Advancements in instrumentation for analysis has the industry on the cusp of being able to say it is the point there are only a handful of constituents in produced water and it knows what is in that water, said McCurdy. And in the time it takes for the industry to move forward on field-scale pilot programs, instrumentation will have reached that point, he said.

Dobson said not only does the industry need to find ways to put recycling on an economic parity with disposal, it needs to get the public comfortable with the idea of reusing treated water, similar to how municipalities treat their water. And

landowners need to be informed about just what water the industry is taking, she added.

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