

For some, fluoridated water still hard to swallow

By MIKE ANTON
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A chemist called it "criminally intolerant chemical warfare to enslave the American people." A self-described inventor and "secret investigator" said the government was trying to "kill you slowly." Another man put it

bluntly: "Communism is one of the factors behind it."

In the summer of 1966, a year after the Watts riots, Los Angeles City Council members took up what The Times called "one of the most controversial proposals ever." The hearings drew hundreds of agitated citizens.

The supercharged issue? Adding fluoride to tap water to

prevent tooth decay. The proposal was defeated, as were subsequent attempts to fluoridate Los Angeles' drinking water in 1968 and 1975. The issue, in Southern California at least, seemed to be dead.

Then last month, the Metropolitan Water District started fluoridating the water it serves 18 million customers across

Southern California, giving life to another round of accusations and conspiracy theories. This time, though, a battle once waged by far-right red baiters is being led by independents and activists on the left.

"We are not lab rats and reject any attempt to be treated as such," actor and liberal political [See Fluoride, Page A20]

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activist Martin Sheen and his wife wrote in a letter to The Malibu Times last month after reading about MWD's fluoridation effort in their latest water bill.

The move, four years in the planning, is the largest fluoridation project in U.S. history and thus a watershed in the peculiar story of one of the nation's longest-running controversies.

For more than 60 years, a debate has simmered over whether artificially fluoridated water is one of public health's greatest achievements or an ill-advised attempt by the government to medicate the population by force with a dangerous chemical.

Fluoride is the Kennedy assassination of chemicals, a fountain of myths and misinformation, with people on each side of the issue accusing those on the other of using half-truths and twisted facts to push their agenda.

Virtually all of the science and medical establishment — including the American Dental Assn., the American Medical Assn., the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — have endorsed fluoride in water. Supporters say numerous studies over the decades show that the chemical, in low concentrations — about one part per million or the equivalent of three drops in 42 gallons of water — reduces tooth decay by 20% to 60% with minimal risk.

"The science is crystal clear," said Jon Roth, executive director of the California Dental Assn. Foundation. "The unfortunate thing is there are still folks out there who do a good job of cherry-picking the scientific information... I don't know where the motivation comes from. I just don't get it."

Though far fewer in number, fluoride's opponents are strident and proud to be committed to an uphill fight. In the 1960s, foes said fluoride produced Down syndrome in children. Today, opponents emphasize fluoride's purported links to bone cancer, thyroid dysfunction and other diseases. They say toxins such as arsenic and lead contaminate the hydrofluosilicic acid used to fluoridate water. They say the benefits are vastly overblown and point to Europe, which has low rates of tooth decay even

though most countries there don't add fluoride to their water.

But today's fluoride opponents are not nearly so vocal as those of a generation ago; there was little opposition in 2003 when the MWD began preparing to fluoridate its water. The city of Los Angeles finally did it in the mid-1990s without public outcry.

In 1945, Grand Rapids, Mich., became the first U.S. city to fluoridate as part of a long-term federal study. In the 1950s and 60s, groups such as the John Birch Society warned that having government tamper with public water was the first step toward totalitarianism.

"It's incredibly obvious, isn't it?" the crazed Gen. Jack D. Ripper asked in the movie "Dr. Strangelove," which lampooned Cold War fluoride opponents. "A foreign substance is introduced into our precious bodily fluids without the knowledge of the individual, and certainly without any choice. That's the way your hard-core commie works."

Ed Edelman, who pushed fluoridation as a young Los Angeles city councilman, recalls being shocked by the vitriol.

"People thought we were trying to put poison in the water," said Edelman, 77. "They came out of the woodwork. They were strange folks... I hate to use the word 'crazies.' Nevertheless, I guess I can use it now."

Today, fluoride isn't among the topics on the John Birch Society's website.

When William F. Jasper first went to work for the group in the mid-1970s, the fluoride fight had taken a back seat to more pressing issues.

"We did have quite large files on fluoridation," said Jasper, a senior editor for the group's magazine. "I'm sure we still do somewhere."

Jasper notes that the John Birch Society still opposes fluoridation as an abuse of government power. But he wasn't aware that his hometown of Sacramento began adding fluoride to its water two years ago.

"That was off my radar screen," Jasper said.

Fluoride opponents today argue that government and industry have conspired to shove fluorosilicic acid — a byproduct of making phosphate fertilizers — down the public's throat as a way

to dispose of the stuff.

"It's the largest single insult to the citizens of this nation in its history," said David Kennedy, a retired San Diego dentist and among the most outspoken opponents who keep the fight alive through such groups as the Web-based Fluoride Action Network.

Kennedy, 62, who also has a degree in biochemistry and physiology, is past president of the International Academy of Oral Medicine and Toxicology, which has promoted research on the dangers of mercury in fillings.

Finding Kennedy is easy. His