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UTILITY

WATER PLANT COMPLETES UPGRADES AND EXPANSION

Pajaro Valley district, Watsonville celebrate improved ag industry offsets

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WATSONVILLE >> Officials on Thursday celebrated $5 million worth of upgrades to the water recycling plant serving the agricultural industry in the greater Watsonville area.

A 1.5-million-gallon water storage tank was added to the Watsonville Area Water Recycling Facility on Clearwater Lane's existing 1-million-gallon storage capacity, in addition to installation of two new distribution pumps and other energy efficiency improvements.

The project, primarily funded with $4.9 million in state grants, was a collaborative effort between the water agency and the city of Watsonville. A ground-breaking ceremony kicking off the project took place in October 2015.

Watsonville Mayor Lowell Hurst called the collaborative recycled water plant projects "monumental," while Santa Cruz County Supervisor Greg Caput said he could recall when bringing up the topic of water was akin to "a fighting word."

One immediate benefit of the project improvements, which first went online in August but were not officially complete until recently, is improved convenience for growers who previously had to schedule access to the irrigation water 24 hours a day.

Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency General Manager Brian Lockwood said growers' pumping schedules were distributed throughout the day and — less conveniently — night, so as not to exceed the processing of the treated water. With increased storage capacity, the plant can process and store the water overnight and provide a larger supply as needed during the day, he said.

Ultimately, the recycling plant's existence serves to offset coastal growers' irrigation water demands on an overtaxed groundwater supply. Those growers who have not turned from their wells to the agency's recycled water supply pay higher augmentation rates, said Lockwood.

Preventing the region's groundwater basin from depleting to the point where seawater seeps into the drinking supply is a multi-pronged effort, under guidance from the Water Basin Management Plan. Encouraging reduced coastal-area pumping allows groundwater levels to rise and create a sort of bar-

Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency unveils its new 1.5-million-gallon-recycled water storage tank Thursday, increasing recycled water storage to 2.5 million gallons.

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rier to saltwater intrusion, Lockwood said.

"It's one thing just to say, you can't pump your wells anymore. And then what happens to all that land out there? The mission of the agency has been to be able to preserve the agricultural community," Lockwood told those gathered for a project ribboncutting ceremony. "By reusing wastewater, treating it to recycled water standards and then being able to send it out through the distribution system in conjunction with our other supplies, that allows farmers and growers to use the supply and reduce the need to pump from their own wells. That helps us to slow the rate of seawater intrusion."

Watsonville Public Works and Utilities Director Steve Palmisano likened Watsonville leaders' vote to go out for a $20 million bond to pay for construction of the recycling facility as "our wedding day" with the water agency.

"Like any couples, we have gone through some growing pains over the years, but we have over that time developed an amazing deep foundation of trust and commitment," Palmisano said. "That's what I would like to celebrate today, the fact that we are now like an old married couple. Things go easy."

Palmisano said the project was "had no hitches, no problems, it just flowed, it's easy."

Pajaro Water Management Agency recycles water to 99.9 percent purity.

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