

PAJARO VALLEY

# MORE RECYCLED WATER IN AGENCY'S FUTURE



PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

A farm worker disks the ground as irrigation flows on a field along San Andreas Road on Thursday in an area that soon will begin receiving recycled water from the Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency.

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**WATSONVILLE** » When it comes to farmers and government, water supply in the Central Coast is at times “fighting words.”

Dale Huss said that the process of convincing coastal growers to stop turning to their own wells and start ordering delivery of recycled water sold by Pajaro Valley Water Agency a decade ago took teamwork. Huss oversees artichoke production for Castroville-based Ocean Mist Farms and led Pajaro Valley Water Agency’s Projects and Facility Operations Committee for more than 15 years.

“Mistrust is something that’s a regular component to ourselves and the govern-

ment. For this project to be successful, we had to be on the same page,” Huss told a small gathering at the recycling plant Thursday during a celebration of the facility’s 10-year anniversary including remarks from U.S. Rep. Jimmy Panetta. “We’re not just 8 to 4:30. We’re 8 to 5:30, 9:30 at night, around the clock if we have to. Because, by the way, that lettuce doesn’t stop growing on Memorial Day, those artichokes don’t stop growing on Labor Day, those strawberries don’t stop growing on whatever holiday we’re talking about.”

**Soil and Cents**

The water agency has targeted coastal farmers to convert their water supply

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Rep. Jimmy Panetta confers with Pajaro Valley Water Management Agency General Manager Brian Lockwood before Thursday’s event celebrating 10 years of recycled water deliveries to farmers by the agency.

# Water

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in order to lessen the impact of the region pulling more water from its underground aquifers than is naturally returning to the ground. When groundwater levels along the coast remain higher than previous trends, the fresh water creates a “hydrostatic barrier” against seawater intrusion into the drinking supply.

Growers had to decide if changing their water supply made “agronomic sense,” Huss said.

“So, we needed to make sure that this water was safe for overhead irrigation on our vegetable crops, but also that it was safe for our workers,” Huss said. “And all that’s been accomplished because of the hard work of everyone sitting here today.”

The city of Watsonville and the water agency joined efforts to open the Watsonville Area Water Recycling Facility in 2009, two years after first breaking ground on the Clearwater Lane facility. The facility now supplies about 5,000 acre feet

a year of irrigation water, mixed with fresh water, to the local agricultural industry, giving wastewater from the neighboring water treatment plant a third or tertiary level of cleaning, rather than piping it all out into Monterey Bay. An acre foot of water water is approximately equal to a foot of water spread across a football field.

The water recycling facility provided a record 1.7 billion gallons of water in 2018 and demand regularly exceeds supply during the summer irrigation season, according to water agency officials. Last year, the water agency unveiled its new 1.5-million-gallon recycled water storage tank, increasing storage to 2.5 million gallons and easing operational limitations on water delivery.

## Model for County, State

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Zach Friend, who represents parts of Watsonville and areas north, commended water agency employees who are setting the stage for conservation and sustainability for both the

county and state in the facing of climate change and continuing development.

Friend said water customers in areas such as the nearby Soquel Water District are continuing to debate the merits of recycled water use. In Soquel Creek Water District, where elected leaders have approved a project to build separate components of an advanced purification treatment plant at the Santa Cruz Wastewater Treatment Plant and in Live Oak, recycled water would be piped into the ground to replenish groundwater supplies, rather than limited to agricultural irrigation.

“The fears that were down here that were expressed by the growers when we first came into office were the exact same that I’m hearing in Soquel Creek,” Friend said after the event. “So, I could consider it a model that could be used. I’ve got people in my district that are eating produce from something that they’re also fearing drinking water from, and not seeing the correlation.”

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