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Santa Paula finally dedicates water plant

By John Scheibe

Posted June 2, 2011 at 6:06 p.m.

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A crowd gathered under the noon sun Thursday in Santa Paula to dedicate a \$62 million water recycling facility that opened a year ago.

"This is the first public-private partnership for a water treatment facility (of its kind) that I'm aware of anywhere in the nation," said Brian Cullen, president of PERC Water, the privately owned company that operates the plant on the south end of Santa Paula.

The plant began operating in May 2010, two years after construction began. Mayor Fred Robinson said the project went remarkably fast.

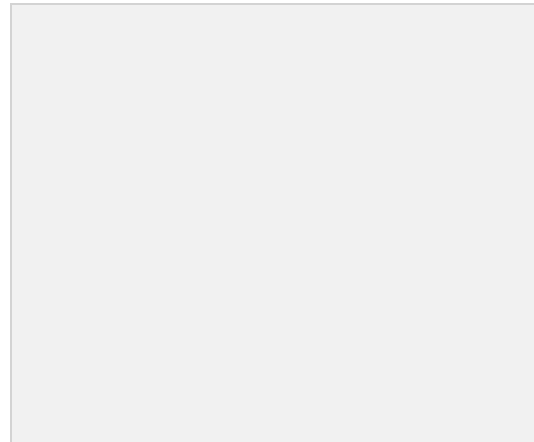
The plant replaced an antiquated facility that had caused the city numerous problems, Robinson said, including foul odors that drifted over much of Santa Paula when the winds blew. The city also was facing fines from the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

City officials said they liked the deal to have PERC design, build and operate the plant partly because the company also would be responsible for financing and any added construction costs.

Santa Paula already had spent millions on plans for different facilities that were never built. Rather than risk more money, officials made the deal with PERC.

PERC will operate the plant for 30 years, until 2040. It secured the financing to build the plant through a partnership with a company called Alinda Capital Partners.

The plant is now recycling water for some 30,000 paying customers. Ultimately, it has the capacity to recycle water for 50,000, Cullen said.

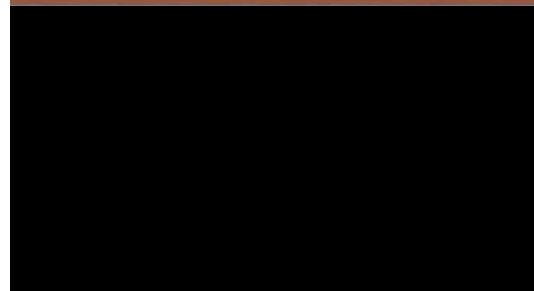


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The plant's innovative features include subterranean treatment ponds, which capture much of the foul odors generated by the dirty water, officials said. The ponds, located beneath the plant, also mean less noise during the treatment process, more efficient use of land, and fewer eyesores, designers said.

Once the water is treated, it is piped into nearby ponds and then percolates into the aquifers below.

Given California's growing population and perennial shortage of water, recycling is something much of the state will need to consider to meet water needs, Cullen said.

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