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Dateland celebrates groundbreaking of new water system

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BY MARA KNAUB - SUN STAFF WRITER

Three federal grants totaling more than \$2.4 million will pay for a new Dateland Public Service Co. system to treat concentrations of arsenic and fluoride in its customers' drinking water.

Alan Stephens, state director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, attended a groundbreaking ceremony Monday and presented the colonia grants.

"Colonia grants allow potable water rates to remain affordable to customers," Stephens said.

The small, nonprofit utility struggles every month to make ends meet, making it difficult to invest in improvements or new equipment, according to staff.

Dateland qualified for the grant as a small, rural community with fewer than 10,000 residents with a median income lower than the average state median income. As such, it could not qualify for a commercial loan to complete the project.

The company serves 114 customers, representing a population of more than 500. The current system's capacity is 90 to 95 customers.

"That's why we can't meet our clean water requirements," Michelle Lane, operations manager, said.

The groundwater in the Dateland basin contains several trace contaminants, including arsenic, fluoride, the irrigation inhibitors boron chloride and sodium, and high levels of TDS (total dissolved solids).

Lane said some of the naturally recurring contaminants come from the dormant Hyder volcano. The contaminants must be removed to comply with water standards.

PACE, a Phoenix water engineering firm, investigated several processes and alternatives and came up with a design for a 80-gallon-per-minute potable water treatment system.

Citywide Contracting of Phoenix will start the project next week and finish by about March 28. The project calls for construction of two lagoons, a solar panel with generator, a new well and pump, new water tank for storage, a brine system to treat arsenic, electrical wiring and mechanical piping.

The upgrade and expansion allows reuse of existing infrastructure "but with significantly higher permeate recovery than the existing RO (reverse osmosis) system, to produce more 'wet' water from the existing supply, reducing water and improving efficiency," according to information supplied by PACE.

Another grant in the works for the utility company will help defray some of the costs for a solar system for the operation.

"About 20 percent of our gross income goes to pay the electric bill," Lane said. "Solar will help us reduce our monthly overhead so we can become financially viable."

PACE provided design of a photovoltaic solar system with 336 panels to power the plant, which will be constructed as part of the second phase of the project.

Michael Krebs, vice president of PACE's Environmental Water Division, called it the first USDA-funded solar system in the state.

"It's going to be a pilot program for small utilities. USDA is paying for us to have solar," Lane noted.

"It's an issue of sustainability. Solar will keep it viable. It means costs won't jump up if the cost of electricity goes up," Stephens said.

Lane noted that the project has been long in coming. She and her husband, Don Lane, the system operator, took over management of the member-owned company in 2007, but she noted that former manager Alice Erb set the plans for a new system in motion in 2003.

"We got roped into this. We wanted water in our house and now we're running the company. We thought we were going to retire," she joked.

She credited Frank Soto, formerly of the Rural Water Association of Arizona, for working with them and the USDA in getting the grants.

"It's fantastic to finally have it come together. There were a lot of hoops to jump through to get federal funding, but it's well worth it," Lane said.

Stephens called it an good partnership between county, state and federal governments and local volunteers. "It's a good example of what happens when a community comes together.

"This is a big day for Dateland. Nothing holds the potential to spark economic growth in this desert of ours like a dependable supply of clean water," he added.

Lane thanked Stephens, Nancy Ngai of the Yuma County Developmental Services, Eduardo Munde of the Rural Water Association and board members Christopher Maynes, John Chudy, Delfina Caughlin, David Renaudin, Diane Nunn and George Rojas.

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Photo by Randy Hoefl/Yuma Sun
Members of the Dateland Public Service Co. board of directors, John Chudy (from left), Christopher Maynes, David Renaudin, Delfina Caughlin, Don Lane, Diane Nunn and Michelle Lane break ground for a new water treatment system in front of the existing system Monday afternoon in Dateland.

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