



Desalting plant runs 'beyond expectations'

[BY JOYCE LOBECK - SUN STAFF WRITER](#)

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A yearlong pilot run of the Yuma Desalting Plant has come to an end ahead of schedule, below budget and to rave reviews.

"It went extremely well," said Jennifer McCloskey, manager of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Yuma Area Office. "The plant operated beyond expectations."

During the pilot run, McCloskey said, the plant was operated continuously with no substantial equipment problems and no down time, even during the 2010 Easter earthquake.

That's despite the fact the plant had sat idle for all but a brief trial run since it was completed 20 years ago.

And water recovery was better than expected, exceeding the plant's design rate, she said. The plant had been designed to recover 70 percent of good water from the briny agricultural runoff it was meant to treat.

"It did better than that," McCloskey.

Undertaken because of the 11-year drought in the Southwest, the pilot run started on May 5, 2010, to test the viability of the plant to augment Colorado River water supplies. In collaboration with The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, Central Arizona Water Conservation District and Southern Nevada Water Authority, Reclamation operated the plant to gather cost and performance data needed to consider potential future operation of it.

In return for their funding support, the water agencies received credits in proportion to the water produced during the pilot run and each of their funding contributions.

The plant recycled 30,000 acre-feet of irrigation return flow water that was returned to the Colorado River to help meet the U.S. treaty obligations to Mexico, McCloskey said.

This resulted in the same amount of water being conserved in Lake Mead for future use by the sponsoring water agencies, she said. With an acre-foot of water measuring 325,851 gallons of water, the pilot run produced approximately the amount of water used by about 116,000 people in a year.

The pilot run was part of an international agreement between the U.S. and Mexico governments as well as environmental groups on both sides of the border. In addition to the pilot run, the pact called for monitoring of the Cienega de Santa Clara, a wetland in Mexico maintained by agricultural drainage.

From a personal perspective, McCloskey said, the success of the collaboration and action on behalf of the wetland "was a significant career accomplishment."

"We were able to balance the needs of the Cienega," McCloskey said, adding that she's pleased at the improved working relationship with Mexico that grew out of the effort.

She also is pleased with the new spirit of cooperation among the partners. "That sets the stage for future collaboration. Even on the U.S. side we've changed the way we operate."

With the pilot run completed, the immediate focus is on decommissioning the plant back to maintenance status, she said. That is expected to take three or four months.

In addition, Reclamation and the sponsoring water agencies will review the results from the pilot run to evaluate the potential for long-term and sustained operation of the desalting plant, McCloskey said.

However, she said, "At this time, there is no specific direction to resume operation of the plant."

David Modeer, general manager of the Central Arizona Water Conservation District, expressed hope that information from the pilot run will lead to plans for the long-term operation of the plant.

"As demonstrated by the pilot operations, water recycling and conservation are important tools to stretch our precious Colorado River water supplies."

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