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Water district opens doors to wastewater plant, serves residents treated sewer water

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SAN JOSE — Former sewer water was the drink of choice Saturday at an event in Alivso to show off the county's new advanced water purification plant and tout the potential for recycled water.

The open house at the facility marked one of the first opportunities for the general public to tour the plant, which opened in July of last year. They were able to see the various pipes and processes that help transform treated — but not purified wastewater — from the nearby water treatment plant into water that's safe enough to drink. The tour ended with a taste test for residents.

The verdict? Many thought it tasted pretty good.

"It tasted better than tap water," said Amelia Delapaz, a San Jose resident who teaches environmental science in Los Gatos. Delapaz, 31, added that she'd have no reservations about drinking purified wastewater. "It would drink it in my tap tomorrow," she said.

The possibility of using recycled wastewater for drinking water was part of the reason for the open house at the purification plant. Currently, purified water from the plant — up to 8 million gallons a day — is mixed with recycled water from the water treatment plant that sits across Zanker Road. The purified water helps to lower the salinity of the recycled water, which is then used for industrial, agricultural and landscaping purposes.

But officials with the Santa Clara Valley Water District, which owns and runs the purification facility, would like to expand it and add the treated water to the groundwater by pumping it into water reservoirs or percolation ponds. From there it could be used as drinking water. Eventually, district officials would like to connect the purified water plant directly to the water pipes that bring fresh water to residents' taps, although state law bars that today.

The water district's master plan calls for the expanded system, estimated to cost around \$800 million, to be built by 2035, but district officials are trying to accelerate that process, hoping to have the new facilities constructed within three to four years, said Beau Goldie, the water district's CEO. Prompting their sense of urgency is the ongoing drought, which has drastically reduced the amount of water that the district has received from the federal and state systems that pump water out of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

"We don't know how long this drought is going to last," Goldie said.

Water from the Delta is pumped into the ground to maintain water levels and to prevent the land from sinking, a constant problem for much of the past century. Water district customers use about the same amount of water today that they used back in 1990, thanks to conservation measures, according to Goldie.

But with water supplies drying up, groundwater levels are getting lower and there's fear that subsidence could return, Goldie said. Pumping purified water back into the groundwater could prevent that and help ensure adequate drinking water supplies in the future.

"El Niño may come this year, but we don't know what's going to happen the year after that and the year after that," he said.

The purification plant pumps recycled wastewater through filtration systems that removes particulates and microorganisms. It then sends it through a reverse osmosis system that removes even smaller particles and microorganisms. Then it sends the water into a tank that removes carbon dioxide before pumping it into vats where the water is illuminated with ultraviolet light to kill off any remaining life forms.

Visitors on Saturday got to trace the whole process from beginning to end on the tour. They then got to taste water that had gone through a second round of UV exposure for even greater purification.

Among those who were slated to take the tour was Rita Espinoza, 31, who is studying environmental science at Evergreen Valley College. She said she'd learned about the plant and the idea of water purification in her classes.

"I'm very excited to get out and see it being done," Espinoza said.

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