

USDA Rural Development Spotlight

PERSEVERANCE PAYS OFF FOR DISTRICT

By Sarah Manservigi, California State Office Rural Development

Their story is a fairly common one - a small, rural water district discharges their treated effluent into surface water until they learn they're not meeting current State requirements, and a cease and desist order ensues. But, the solution Rio Alto Water District (RAWD) developed in response is a little more unique. And their perseverance in the face of adversity resulted in long-term benefits to their district as well as their small community of Lake California in Tehama County.

"When we were faced with the cease and desist order the district started considering possible options, there were six alternatives that we looked over. In the end, we decided that a long-term solution was going to be the most feasible for us," said Martha Slack, Rio Alto Water District General Manager.

Instead of continuing to discharge their treated wastewater into the Sacramento River, the district decided to make improvements to their treatment plant and purchase land to create ponds and wetlands for land disposal. Their design goal was to create an almost "park-like" atmosphere. Although it was a costly endeavor, they felt the added benefit to the community of walking trails, benches and a new wetland for wildlife was worthwhile.

"We all laughed at this idea originally, but in the end, it became the most feasible," said Slack. "We were able to solve our regulatory issue with an amenity for the community."



The project was going to be big, and before they could even get started they needed to form a Community Facilities District, hold an election for the newly formed district, and also pass a special tax with a two-thirds vote – all in the middle of the recession. Little did they realize it, but these hurdles they overcame at the start were just the beginning of a long, bumpy road.

Not only did the project require major improvements to RAWD's wastewater treatment facility including a complete overhaul to their electrical system and a new clarifier, they were constructing 39.5 wetted acre ponds and wetlands. And they needed to install two miles of forcemain to get from the treatment plant to the wetland. The project was expected to cost the district around \$6.2 million.

RAWD worked with USDA Rural Development Area Specialist Mike Colbert to help secure financing from the agency. In 2012, USDA approved a \$5 million 40-year loan at 2.75 percent interest. The

district also received another \$1.215 million 20-year loan from the State Revolving Loan Fund.

"I absolutely loved working with USDA," said Slack. "Mike's assistance was invaluable, he was quick, responsive and helped us through the entire process. Anytime I hear about someone that has a project they need to finance I tell them, 'call USDA!'"

Unfortunately, construction didn't continue down the same path of ease. For starters, bids were much higher than originally anticipated, which required a few adjustments to put them back on track. Then, in the process of running the pipeline to the new wetlands they unexpectedly discovered a Native American burial site, and soon their costs for environmental and subsequent mitigation requirements were over six times what they budgeted for. Eventually they were able to move forward by bringing in enough

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Perseverance pays off continued



fill dirt to protect the remains, placing the pipe on top of the road, and then raising the entire sensitive area by 3 feet to protect the pipeline.

While dealing with the pipeline issues, they were also busy constructing the ponds. The design called for sloping banks with plantings, but they were quickly becoming victim to erosion from rain as well as wave action from inside the pond. So the decision was made to rock the sides, and once again, RAWD had to add another cost to their budget. Yet another change was made when it was discovered one of the ponds wouldn't percolate. About a foot of organic matter, most likely old manure from the swine farm that had previously been at the site, was preventing water from penetrating the surface. That meant removing the material blocking the water, replacing it with new dirt, and more money.

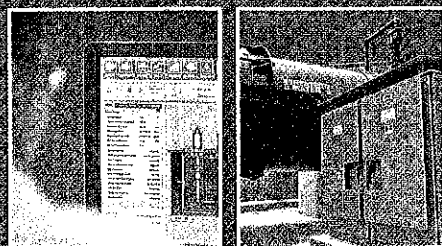
"Once you start digging in the ground you never really know what you'll find, unfortunately for the district they were faced with just about every obstacle there was," said Colbert. "It ended up pushing them over their original budget by about \$1.1 million, but we were able to

come back with a \$441,000 cost-overrun grant. Our funds combined with the district's own contributions and another grant they received to make up the shortfall."

After five years of planning, two years of construction and more than a few headaches for Slack and the district board, RAWD had a public opening ceremony of the new wetlands in May 2016. Just when they thought the coast was clear, the district faced yet another complication. One of the ponds, which had been amended to hold water for aesthetic purposes, was about to overflow and the existing outfall couldn't keep up. Three new culverts are currently being added to help with drainage into the other ponds. "Despite everything, and it's been a bear getting here, we're really thrilled with the outcome," said Slack. "USDA was our saving grace to move this project forward, and now at the end of the day, we're right where we want to be."

Sometimes perseverance really does pay off. ■

On average, USDA Rural Development invests \$1 billion in California's rural communities each year for a variety of infrastructure, housing, business, economic and community development projects. To learn more about USDA Rural Development's programs for water, wastewater and solid waste projects visit www.rd.usda.gov/ca.



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