

# MERCED SUN-STAR

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## Planada to expand wastewater treatment facility

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Dirt is shoveled during a groundbreaking ceremony at the Planada wastewater treatment plant on Wednesday. The Planada Community Services District proposes to stop dumping into Miles Creek and to use treated wastewater for irrigation.

Planada's wastewater treatment facility will finally undergo a long-awaited upgrade – one that may help alleviate some burden on the community's limited water supply.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development joined the Planada Community Services District, which owns and operates the plant, to break ground on the project. State Water Resources Control Board representatives were also present.

Officials estimate Planada's wastewater treatment facility project will be completed by January 2017. They said the \$13.5 million project will change how the district disposes of its treated water.

According to the USDA, the district has been dumping treated wastewater into Miles Creek, but it does not meet the state's surface water standards. The district's challenges in meeting these standards resulted in fines that the district could not afford.

Because of Planada's designation as a small community with financial hardship, the regional water quality control board was allowed to suspend the penalties as long as the district agreed to complete a compliance project.

The district proposed to stop dumping into Miles Creek, and instead use the treated wastewater to irrigate crops not consumed by humans, such as alfalfa.

Jose Guardado, an area specialist with the USDA Rural Development, explained that the project will consist of constructing two new sewer water treatment ponds, which required the purchase of new land to construct on.

Guardado explained that in the past, farmers did not want treated wastewater on their properties, but with the drought and the expected improvement in quality, local farmers are now seeking this treated wastewater for irrigation.

The project has been in development for about 12 years. Daniel Chavez, the general manager at the Planada Community Services District, said the delay was due in big part to lack of funding.

In 2013, the USDA invested \$4.8 million in loan and grant funding to the project through its Water and Environment Program. The state provided an additional \$8.5 million, and the district accounted for the remainder.

“This is a historic day for Planada,” Chavez said. “It’s helping us meet the needs of our community.”

Olivia Gomez, president of the Planada Community Services District Board, said she hopes the improved facility will also help attract businesses to the area.

Planada wasn’t able to provide sewer connections to developers until the issue was taken care of, she explained. “But we want to open our doors to businesses, so we’re excited about this.”

USDA Rural Development officials said it was suitable to break ground on the sustainable project on the 45th anniversary of Earth Day. The agency also announced the funding for 37 water and wastewater projects and 25 renewable energy projects in other rural communities around the country on Wednesday.