Santa Barbara Unveils New El Estero Water Resource Center

SANTA BARBARA, CA – April 22, 2019 – Members of the City Council and Water Commission unveiled the newly renamed El Estero Water Resource Center today, celebrating recently completed improvements to the wastewater treatment process. El Estero’s new name and upgrades reflect the significant role the facility plays in community sustainability by providing resource recovery and protection of the environment and public health.

“We put a stake in the ground 49 years ago when we said protecting our environment and our ocean was a top priority. And we’ve maintained that leadership role, as the home of Earth Day, but also being known as a community that invests in protecting our surroundings,” Mayor Cathy Murillo said. “What better occasion than Earth Day 2019 to acknowledge El Estero’s past and recognize its future in addressing water resiliency—one of the key environmental challenges facing us in the twenty-first century.”

Mayor Murillo noted that sustainability and environmental stewardship have long been core values for Santa Barbara. “El Estero Water Resource Center’s upgrades and new name will help educate that there is no ‘new’ water—we have to conserve what we have, prepare for effects of climate change and drought, reduce our environmental footprint, and recover this valuable resource for future use and benefit.”

Originally constructed in 1951, the facility has undergone numerous advances in treatment technology and processes and today treats over six million gallons of wastewater daily while protecting the environment and public health. The latest upgrades to the plant allow for enhanced nutrient removal, which improves the finished water quality. This improved water quality has the added benefit of increasing the ability of the water to be utilized for expanded use of recycled water.

The wastewater that comes to the El Estero Water Resource Center is transformed into four renewable end products: treated water that can be safely released 1.5 miles offshore into the ocean; recycled water used to irrigate schools, parks, golf courses, and other sites, reducing demands for precious potable water; biosolids that are composted and used at farms and parks for soil nutrient recovery; and biogas that generates hot water and electricity to offset more than 70% of the energy needs of El Estero.

“It is fitting that on Earth Day we celebrate the environmental and public health benefits that the El Estero Water Resource Center brings to the people of Santa Barbara and the quality of the waters off this beautiful stretch of California’s coast,” said Mike Stoker, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Pacific Southwest Regional Administrator. “We are proud to join the state in helping fund this effort and to further the EPA’s mission by supporting critical water infrastructure here and across the nation.”

The Earth Day event at El Estero Water Resource Center included remarks from Mayor Murillo, Mr. Stoker, Water Resources Manager Joshua Haggmark, Heal the Ocean Executive Director Hillary Hauser, and Poet Laureate Laure-Anne Bosselaar.
According to Mr. Haggmark, the “relaunch” of the facility is more than a renaming. “We knew we needed to help change the conversation in Santa Barbara, recognizing this essential facility takes the ‘waste’ out of water, and supporting the goals of this community that all resources have value.” Mr. Haggmark said that the 56 employees who operate the facility and the collection system were integral in the renaming process to better reflect El Estero’s critical role in the community and the direction we are headed.

“It is our hope and our plan that we can someday reuse all of the water from El Estero Water Resource Center, taking advantage of improving technologies. Water is a precious resource at all phases, surface water, groundwater, recycled water, stormwater, seawater, and now wastewater,” said Mr. Haggmark. “The El Estero Water Resource Center is a hub of environmental protection, resource recovery and innovation.”