

Water from water

Desal plant provides resource for future

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The public gathered Aug. 8 for the dedication of the Kay Bailey Hutchison Desalination Plant on Montana Avenue. The \$87 million plant is built on Fort Bliss property and is being leased by the El Paso Water Utilities.

“This is a big day for El Paso and El Paso County,” said Ed Archuleta, president and CEO of El Paso Water Utilities. “I can’t tell you how big it is for the people who’ve worked long and hard on it.” The project is also beneficial for Fort Bliss, he said, because new wells built along Loop 375 will protect the intrusion of brackish water into the post’s water supply.

The brackish, salty water in the Hueco Bolson aquifer is now being turned into fresh drinking water at the rate of 8,000 gallons per day. Within a few months, production should reach full capacity of 27.5 million gallons – 25 percent of the area’s current daily demand – making it the largest inland desalination plant in the country.

The 39 miles of pipeline bring the brackish water from 32 wells on Fort Bliss and El Paso International Airport land into the plant, where the minerals are separated from the water through the reverse osmosis process. The resulting salty “concentrate” is then pumped through a 22-mile pipeline to three deep-injection wells at McGregor Range, N.M.

“Years ago, [the Hueco Bolson aquifer] was being mined, meaning there was more water taken out than being put in,” Archuleta said. “But today, because of conservation, the use of reclaimed water and the use of surface water from the river, we have now a sustainable aquifer.

“The way we’re dealing with the concentrate – this is where I really need to thank the Army and



PHOTOS BY MELISSA HOUSE

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, left, and U.S. Rep. Silvestre Reyes talk with Maj. Gen. Robert P. Lennox after the dedication of the Kay Bailey Hutchison Desalination Plant in East El Paso Aug. 8.

Fort Bliss,” he said. “General Lennox, Colonel Burns and all your predecessors – we’ve worked toward this in the last five years. A lot of credit goes to the military because they partnered with us.”

Rep. Silvestre Reyes and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison both spoke about the importance of the project and the role Fort Bliss played in the 15 years of work leading up to the groundbreaking in August 2005.

“In the 10 years since I took office, every time I went after funding projects and military construction, we always used to get hammered about El Paso being a community that’s going to run out of water,” Reyes said. “I talked with Senator Hutchison and other members of the community. There never was a water issue here. We have plenty of water. But here was a perception that there was a water issues. To the outsider looking in, it looked as if we were a community under siege, continuously worrying about where our next glass of water was coming from.”

Through the technology of the desalination process, he said, the community is now able to harness “one of the key elements necessary for life.” The plant is the first to use the deep-well concentrate disposal, and will only “cost” \$1.65 per 1,000 gallons and should provide sufficient water for the growth of El Paso and Fort Bliss. “This is a world-class project,” he said.

Hutchison said Fort Bliss was one of two institutions in El Paso she has “championed” through the years.

“We have worked so hard to make sure Fort Bliss was always going to be a premiere Army base for our country,” Hutchison said, “but there was a time in a previous [Base Realignment and Closure] when it looked like the Army was kind of bleeding Fort Bliss and so Congressman Reyes and I went to the

Army chief of staff and things turned around. But then the big question is – can El Paso produce the water that is needed for a major infusion at Fort Bliss?”

“Because Fort Bliss has the advantage that no other base in our country has – ranges for training, etcetera, the water was the key issue. General Lennox, we are so proud of Fort Bliss and so proud of your leadership. This historical base is going to be one of the greatest Army bases in the world because of this effort for water.”

The plant also features the Carlos M. Ramirez Tech20 Center, with an auditorium, interactive displays and exhibits, which will open in November.



This fountain is at the center of the Carlos M. Ramirez Tech20 Center. Interactive displays and exhibits at the center are scheduled to open in November.

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Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison



Ed Archuleta, president and CEO of El Paso Water Utilities, and Mayor John Cook watch Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison sign a reverse osmosis membrane after the desalination plant dedication ceremony.