

Utilities agency making energy, saving money

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We're glad to see our local utilities agency continue to break ground in the conservation of water, energy - and money.

Inland Empire Utilities Agency, headquartered in Chino, treats and delivers water across the Inland Valley, from Pomona to Fontana.

IEUA has been a state leader in delivering recycled water - in those purple pipes - for use on golf courses and other sites that use lots of water for landscaping or irrigation. That reduces the amount of water the Inland Valley has to import from uncertain and expensive sources like the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and the Colorado River, thereby saving all local water customers money.

And now the agency has adopted a Go Gridless by 2020 Initiative, by which it aims to generate all the power it uses during peak electricity-usage hours.

It won't literally go "gridless" - the IEUA will still be hooked up to Southern California Edison's transmission lines - but the goal is to generate enough electricity on-site to avoid using SCE power from noon to 6 p.m. each day.

The agency has been moving in this direction for a while. In 2008, IEUA installed solar panels at four of its facilities, generating collectively 3.5 megawatts of electricity - enough to power 2,500 homes.

That huge wind turbine you can see from quite a distance, northeast of the 10-15 Freeway interchange, is IEUA's. It generates 1 megawatt, or 20 percent of the electricity needed to run the water-recycling plant where it's sited.

And now, IEUA is adding fuel cells to its renewable energy effort. They will generate 2.8 megawatts from a combination of bio-gas and natural gas, replacing old, less efficient combustion engines. And a partnership with Burrtech Waste and Environ will bring food waste to the agency's Ontario recycling plant, which will produce bio-gas that will generate 1.5 megawatts - diverting solid wastes from landfills in the bargain.

Using solar, wind, fuel cells and bio-gas, IEUA expects to produce two-thirds of its energy by the end of this year, nearly twice last year's amount. That makes the "gridless by 2020" goal look quite realistic.

And make no mistake, a lot of power is needed to treat wastewater and deliver recycled water. It costs about \$200,000 a year just to run blowers that aerate water as part of the treatment process, and pumping the product uphill to foothill communities draws considerable juice.

IEUA is entering partnerships to make these projects happen. For example, it leases agency property to a company that installs the fuel cells and the filtering technology the cells need. IEUA has a long-term contract to buy the electricity generated, at a lower rate than it would expect to pay SCE over the years.

An improved water supply, renewable energy, waste diverted from landfills and cheaper electricity. What's not to like?