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San Elijo JPA wins top honors for automated plume tracking

The San Elijo Joint Powers Authority received top accolades from San Diego chapters of the American Public Works Association and American Society of Civil Engineers.

Both associations recognized San Elijo and its partners, Encina Wastewater Authority and City of Escondido, for their “Autonomous Underwater Vehicle Plume Transport Assessments of the San Elijo and Encina Ocean Outfalls.” Working together, the three agencies were able to efficiently comply with ocean discharge permit requirements through economies of scale and collaboration during data collection and analysis.

The assessment was a three-year effort that monitored and accessed environmental impacts of two regional ocean outfall systems that are located off the Cardiff and South Carlsbad State Beaches. In total, the outfalls discharge treated wastewater from more than 700,000 residents and businesses in north San Diego County. Although the agencies have strong recycled water programs that reuse more than 1.5 billion gallons annually, treated wastewater that isn’t recycled is discharged to the ocean.

The study examined ocean water around the outfalls that discharge treated water approximately 1.5 miles offshore to quantify if the discharge is having harmful effects to the aquatic environment. Using underwater drones, the study measured concentrations of salinity, colored dissolved organic matter (cDOM), fluorescing dissolved organic matter (fDOM), conductivity, temperature, and current. Based on the data gathering, the firm Michael Baker International concluded in a report that, “The San Elijo and Encina Outfall discharge has no potential to impact water quality in nearshore and surf zone waters.”

The agencies won a 2023 Project of the Year Award from the American Public Works Association and a 2023 Outstanding Environmental Engineering Project from the American Society of Civil Engineers, San Diego chapters.

“Protecting environment is our top priority,” said Mike Thornton, San Elijo JPA’s general manager, “last year, we recycled 70% of the flow we received and when we have to discharge to the ocean, we need to ensure that it is not causing harm to the environment.”

The San Elijo Joint Powers Authority is a local leader in environmental stewardship, providing award-winning wastewater treatment and recycled water services for the communities of Encinitas, Solana Beach, Del Mar and Rancho Santa Fe.