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Workers at the Cerro de la Estrella water treatment plant in Mexico City, which has one of the lowest water treatment rates in the country

Bidding begins as gov't eyes sewage fix

BY DAVID AGREN
The News

Bidding opened on Tuesday for the construction of a water treatment plant that federal officials say will put an end to the practice of pumping raw sewage from the Mexico City area and dumping it untreated in the state of Hidalgo.

The 8 billion-peso Atotonilco treatment plant, billed as one of the world's largest, is projected to increase the treatment rate for the Valley of Mexico's wastewater from less than 9 percent to nearly 60 percent by mid-2012. The subsequent construction of four smaller plants will boost the rate to nearly 100 percent, said National Water Commission, or Conagua, director José Luis Luege Tamargo.

"This is a great step forward in sanitation on the national

level," Luege Tamargo said at a press conference Tuesday. "The objective is that the Valley of Mexico treats 100 percent of its waste water and reuses the highest rate possible."

The plant will be built in Atotonilco de Tula, Hidalgo, through a public-private partnership and will recycle enough water to supply three irrigation districts in Hidalgo, where farmers grow crops with wastewater from Mexico City.

Despite the optimism, the economic crisis has caused the government to scrap several major infrastructure projects due to low bids, including the Punta Colonet port project.

President Calderón has promoted construction of six treatment plants outside Mexico City – one in Hidalgo and five in the State of Mexico – as part of a larger environmental agen-

da that focuses heavily on reforestation and efficient water use, especially in the capital.

The water treatment rate in the capital ranks among the lowest in the country; Aguascalientes, Toluca and Monterrey all treat more than 95 percent of their wastewater, according to Conagua.

Those cities also charge more for water than Mexico City and the surrounding municipalities, where rates are subsidized. But once the Atotonilco plant comes on line, local charges could experience a slight bump. Luege Tamargo said Tuesday that the tariffs Conagua charges municipalities in the area will likely need to increase by nearly 3 pesos per cubic meter to cover water treatment rates.

Environmental groups lauded the construction of the facility and other treatment plants,

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although Claudia Gómez-Portugal of the Mexican Environmental Law Center said that pressing issues such as leaky water and sewer lines and curbing unplanned urban developments persist. "Much more has to be done," she said.