

Powder handling equipment improves filtration at desalination plant

A US desalination plant has improved its handling of a silica powder type substance with a system provided by Flexicon.

The 2787 square-metre Tampa Bay Seawater Desalination Plant in Florida produces up to 94.6 million litres of drinking water per day, making it the largest seawater desalination plant in North America. Since March 2007, the plant has desalinated over 13.6 billion litres of drinking water from the Tampa Bay.

In 2005, however, the plant was shut down, as it could not meet expected operational sustainability. Tampa Bay Water, the government agency responsible for the plant, assigned remediation work to American Water and Acciona Agua, through their operating partnership American Water-Pridesa, a group that has designed and built more than 50 desalination plants worldwide.

Among the firm's many improvements is the addition of Precoat Filtration using a bulk handling system for diatomaceous earth. This has proven to be instrumental in re-establishing the plant as a major source of drinking water for the Tampa Bay region.

Reverse osmosis converts seawater

Desalination plants rely on reverse osmosis, which uses high pressure to force water through semi-permeable membranes that remove salt from seawater. To ensure efficient reverse osmosis, seawater must be pretreated to remove particulates.

During remediation at the Tampa plant, American Water Acciona Agua improved pretreatment by adding coagulation and flocculation, improving the operation of the existing sand filters and installing a diatomaceous earth filtration system to eliminate microscopic materials from the water prior to reverse osmosis, reports Nacho Lopez, construction manager of the Tampa project.

Diatomaceous earth is a silica powder (hydrated silicon dioxide) comprised of the cell walls of phytoplankton called diatoms. Applied to the pressure side of filter elements, diatomaceous earth traps micron-size particles that would otherwise pass through ordinary filter media.

Diatomaceous earth powder is added to seawater upstream of the filter, forming a cloud of diatomaceous earth particles that coats the filter medium and, in turn, traps solid contaminants as water passes through the diatomaceous earth coating. When contaminants build up, indicated by pressure increases, the filter is backwashed, after which another dose of diatomaceous earth is added to the water to re-coat the filter medium.

The Tampa Bay plant consumes 1814 to 2722 kilograms per day of diatomaceous earth, which arrives in 408-kilogram bulk bags that are stored in a temperature and humidity controlled area to prevent compaction of the material.

When the reverse osmosis process calls for diatomaceous earth, a crane moves a bag from storage to either of two bulk



Above and Below: Two bulk bag unloaders unload and transfer 1814-2722 kilograms per day of diatomaceous earth for Tampa Bay desalination plant's diatomaceous earth filtration system. The crane deposits a lifting frame holding the bulk bag onto the unloader frame.



bag weigh batching systems that feed the diatomaceous earth to a 1136-litre tank where it is put in suspension with water to a 5 per cent concentration. The suspension is then metred into the saltwater upstream of the filter by peristaltic pumps.



Above and Below: A Bag-Vac dust collector, mounted on the bulk bag unloader frame, vacuums displaced air and dust, and collapses empty bags dust-free prior to tie-off and removal. The bulk bag is supported in a lifting frame.



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The 1.8-cubic-metre capacity hopper holds the contents of a 408-kilogram bulk bag allowing diatomaceous earth to transfer, unattended, through the flexible screw conveyor to the tank. Load cells under the unloader frame transmit weight loss information to a PLC to achieve accurate batch weight transfer.

System moves diatomaceous earth dust-free

The diatomaceous earth bulk handling equipment, produced by Flexicon Corp. of the US, consists of two identical systems, allowing cleaning and maintenance of either system with no interruption in the movement of diatomaceous earth from the bulk bags to the dilution tank where it is utilised.

Each system consists of a bulk bag unloader with loss-of-weight batching controls and an integral flexible screw conveyor.

The bulk bag unloaders measure 1.5 metres square. Four vertical extension posts are adjustable in overall height from 4.35 to 5.8 metres to accommodate bulk bags from 914 to 2134 millimetres tall.

The unloaders are equipped with Flow-Flexer bag activators that raise and lower opposite bottom edges of the bulk bag



At the flexible screw conveyor's discharge end, diatomaceous earth flows through a transition adapter into the 1136-litre tank where the diatomaceous earth is put in suspension with water.

at timed intervals, improving material flow into the bag's discharge spout. As the bag lightens, the stroke of the pneumatic bag activators lengthens, producing a steep "V" bag shape to promote evacuation of material.

Also promoting flow are a Spout-Lock clamp ring that creates a high-integrity, sealed connection with the bag spout, and a Tele-Tube telescoping tube that applies continual downward tension on the bag as it empties and elongates.

Above the clamp ring is a Power-Cincher flow-control valve whose curved, articulated rods cinch the bag spout concentrically, allowing the operator to control the flow of material through the spout after releasing the bag spout drawstring, as well as to close and retie the spout of partially empty bags with no leakage or dusting.

Diatomaceous earth flows from the bulk bag through the bag spout into a 1.8-cubic metre capacity surge bin able to hold the entire contents of one bulk bag, effectively doubling the unattended run time of dischargers having small surge hoppers.

The sealed system is vented through a port in the hopper lid to a dust collector that vacuums displaced air and dust, and collapses empty bags dust-free prior to tie-off and removal, eliminating manual flattening and associated dusting. Reverse-jet filter cleaning allows the vacuum system to operate at high efficiency, while extending filter life.

The hopper discharges into an intake adapter that charges a Model 1250 flexible screw conveyor with diatomaceous earth. A cantilevered arm on the bulk bag unloading frame supports the discharge end of the 4.6-metre-long conveyor tube which is inclined at 30 degrees. At the discharge end, a gear-drive assembly with a 0.75 kilowatt motor rotates the flexible screw, propelling diatomaceous earth through the 67-millimetre OD plastic tube.

Loss-of weight batching provides accurate dosing of diatomaceous earth

When the diatomaceous earth dilution tank has discharged its contents, a level indicator signals the PLC that controls the weigh batching system to initiate a weigh batching cycle by running one of the flexible screw conveyors. Load cells supporting the bulk bag unloader frame with integral conveyor transmit weight loss information to the PLC which reduces the conveyor speed immediately before stopping the conveyor, achieving an accurate batch weight. "Based on the amount of weight lost, the PLC also indicates when the operator needs to load a full bag of diatomaceous earth into the unloader," says Lopez.

Weight loss information is shown on an LCD, part of a control centre that includes a keypad, custom-engineered software, and an A/C inverter with adjustable speed control and a reversing feature for the conveyor drive.

When operating at full capacity, the plant provides the Tampa Bay region with approximately 10 per cent of its drinking water.

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