Executive Summary

AN ENVIRONMENT LIKE NO OTHER

*New Orleans is known by locals and tourists alike as “The Big Easy.” But those running its wastewater plant see things differently.*

The city of New Orleans sits below sea level in an area where hurricanes are a recurring problem. Its average rainfall exceeds 60 inches per year and its service area is almost half a million people. This is not an ordinary city with ordinary environmental issues. In fact, the city’s unique features provide a constant environmental challenge to those tasked with protecting water quality through the proper operations of the city’s wastewater infrastructure.

When the City started looking for a private partner to operate, maintain and manage its wastewater facilities, these challenges were top of mind. They needed a partner who would be just that—a colleague who could work closely with the City to overcome its unique environmental obstacles. So in 1992, when the Sewerage & Water Board of New Orleans (S&WB) entered into a public-private partnership with Veolia Water, they made sure that the private partner had the expertise and the willingness to work hand-in-hand.

Today the partnership represents one of the largest wastewater treatment operations under contract in the U.S. and is notable for its compliance, its success and for the way the City and Veolia Water have worked together to deal with overwhelming environmental issues.

The highest-profile test came when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, placing tremendous strain on the City’s people, employees...and wastewater infrastructure. Literally overnight, Hurricane Katrina triggered concerns for the public health — and environmental quality. In an environmental crisis of that magnitude, one in which flooding afflicts the entire city and rain is never-ending, proper wastewater operations are a top priority. Knowing this, the USEPA imposed tight deadlines to bring the City’s facilities back on-line.

Veolia Water and the City worked together and Veolia Water utilized its own capital to immediately begin plant repairs in order to protect the natural resources of the Gulf Coast region and the City’s infrastructure assets. The partnership quickly returned to sewerage treatment and met the USEPA’s tight deadline — a move that was essential in protecting the natural environment and safeguarding public health and safety.
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No less an indicator of the partnership’s environmental commitment is the recognition it has achieved for its efforts. The partnership is consistently recognized for its outstanding compliance record with State and USEPA regulations. Veolia Water and the City have earned multiple awards, including the 2010 Gold Award for the West Bank plant and a Silver Award for the East Bank from the National Association of Clean Water Agencies for exceptional environmental compliance.

The City and Veolia Water recently undertook several new, exciting environmental projects. Most recently, a wetlands assimilation project, developed in conjunction with Tulane University, will restore an urban, degraded wetlands into a lavish cypress forest, leveraging Veolia Water’s industrial expertise. Another project uses incinerator ash as industrial fill, contributing to New Orleans’ natural landscape and saving the waste from landfills.

The partnership makes environmental protection a top priority – but it understands that protecting taxpayers is equally important. Since the inception of the contract, Veolia Water has worked with the S&WB to generate $26 million in overall savings for residents.

These savings can be attributed to strategic planning (including a $1.7 million capital improvements program implemented the first year of the contract) as well as innovative solutions. For example, the development and implementation of the incinerator ash beneficial reuse project has generated more than $158,000 in savings to date.

For 20 years, managing infrastructure under extreme natural conditions has been a shared responsibility of the City and Veolia Water. This infrastructure partnership grows deeper as the partners continue to set standards for compliance, infrastructure improvements, cost savings, community outreach, and innovative solutions and technologies. The partnership expects this relationship to continue and looks forward to many more years of serving the community – regardless of the challenges nature throws its way.