

Height of selfishness

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In My Opinion



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Bud Kennedy

COLLEYVILLE - The lush green lawns of Texas showcase our selfish little habit.

We're watering way too much -- in some larger cities, hogging half again more water than we should under a North Texas conservation goal.

One city administrator described the region's water waste somberly:

"Our cities have an addiction to water," Colleyville City Manager Bill Lindley said Wednesday, his hands folded as if he were a psychiatrist delivering a blunt diagnosis.

"We've got to get off that addiction."

Colleyville residents drain an average 74 gallons a day per person more than the regional goal of 140 gallons. Mostly, that waters meticulously landscaped lawns on large lots.

Some smaller, mostly residential, cities such as Trophy Club, Westover Hills and Dalworthington Gardens use even more water. The list of big drinkers also includes Grapevine and Southlake, two cities with a lot of thirsty businesses and restaurants.

No Tarrant County city matches the water consumption in the Dallas suburb of Highland Park, where the well-scrubbed residents use nearly three times the regional goal.

Trophy Club is more than 100 gallons per person over the goal, according to 2003 records, the most recent available from the Texas Water Development Board.

"Wow," Mayor Nick Sanders said. "I just wasn't aware it was that much." Trophy Club residents buy their water from utility districts that follow conservation rules set by the original seller, the city of Fort Worth.

Right now, those rules include the threat of a \$2,000 fine for watering with sprinklers between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. In Arlington, the fine is \$500.

But Lindley said the problem is "not just that it's dry or hot. This is not going to go away next month, or next year, or the year after. This is a problem we have to solve long-range."

He compared our lawn-watering habits to our passion for driving sport utility vehicles.

"We used to buy the big gas guzzlers," he said. "Now, we're getting used to driving hybrids and driving more carefully."

Colleyville is launching a long-range campaign to help save the region's water. City employees from Lindley down to the police and inspectors will carry informal notices to hang on doorknobs, telling residents about sprinklers left running or leaky irrigation systems.

The city has already reduced water use -- in 2003, it was 214 gallons per day -- by about 4 percent and hopes to reach 5 percent, city spokeswoman Mona Gandy said. A poster campaign will promote conservation with a slogan like "Be Careful With Water," and city workers will study how similar cities around Austin and San Antonio reduced their use, she said.

It could be a lot worse.

Dallas suburbs such as Frisco and McKinney restrict household watering to once a week under emergency rules set by their water seller, the Wylie-based North Texas Municipal Water District.

The average person in those cities used about 150 to 180 gallons a day in the 2003 report, so those cities were already conserving better than other North Texas suburbs.

Technically, the region's worst water usage is in Addison, where bars, restaurants, hotels and businesses drive the water usage to 434 gallons per resident per day. But on any given day, thousands of workers inflate Addison's official residential population.

Sanders, the Trophy Club mayor, said workers in the Solana business complex might drive up his city's water-use figure.

But there is no such excuse for small, isolated suburbs such as Dalworthington Gardens or larger, mostly residential cities such as Colleyville, where the average of 214 gallons per day does not even count the water that more than 300 residents draw from their own wells.

Highland Park residents use an average of 394 gallons per day. Westover Hills, a smaller but comparably wealthy suburb on the west side of Fort Worth, uses an average of 379.

Most Colleyville residents are eager to help conserve, Lindley said. The city has only recently begun explaining the local effort and the need to help conserve the entire region's water.

But in Colleyville, and probably every North Texas city, "there are a few people who think that watering their lawn is a God-given right," he said.

"They say, 'This is my water, I pay for it, and I'm going to play my way.'"

That doesn't guard Texas' water.

REGIONAL WATER USE

Figures are gallons used per person per day in 2003, the latest figures available.

WATER GUZZLERS

Rhome 386

Westover Hills 379

Haslet 348

Venus 339

Lakeside 326

Southlake 252

Trophy Club 244

Dalworthington Gardens 242

Pantego 238

Grapevine 231

Colleyville 214

Benbrook 202

THE CITIES

Arlington 173

Dallas 238

Fort Worth 177

Irving 212

Plano 225

REGIONAL GOAL

140

SOURCE: 2003 Water Use Survey Summary Estimates by city, Texas Water Development Board