

El Pasoans save billion gallons of water in '01

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By Laura Cruz

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El Pasoans saved 1 billion gallons of water this year, El Paso Water Utilities officials said.

The average household used about 155 gallons of water a day -- 4 gallons less a day than last year, said Anai Padilla, water conservation manager. El Pasoans used an estimated 34.5 billion gallons of water this year, compared with 35.5 billion gallons last year, she said.

"El Paso is a leader in the conservation arena," Padilla said. "But we live in a desert, and we should not take water for granted."

The region is under pressure to find ways to conserve the water it has or find other water supplies. The freshwater reserves of the Hueco and Mesilla bolsons - - the region's major aquifers -- are shared with New Mexico, Texas and Mexico and are diminishing quickly. And the Rio Grande -- the region's main surface water supply -- can't be relied on during droughts. Without conservation projects, the city will not have enough water come 2030, officials have warned.

Northeast resident Beatriz Lira believes she is doing her part to save the desert's most precious resource.

"I didn't water my lawn this year because I want my grass to die so that I can put in a rock landscape this summer," she said. "My water bill was becoming too expensive, but I also want to conserve water."

The city water utility has reimbursed El Pasoans for replacing turf with xeriscaping and also offers rebates for people who buy water-saving fixtures and appliances. This year, 484 rebates were given to customers who bought refrigerated air conditioners and 345 rebates were given to those who bought water-efficient washing machines. The utility has given 34,000 rebates to replace toilets with water-efficient models since the program began in 1991.

Free bleed-off line restrictor clamps and low-flow shower heads are also available at the utility's headquarters, 1154 Hawkins. Lira received one of 175,000 free shower heads distributed since April 2000.

Padilla said the utility hopes to reduce daily water consumption to 140 gallons a household by 2010.