

Strict water rules could be on tap

Despite ample rain and full reservoirs, officials pursue greater conservation

By **MAX B. BAKER**, 6/04/2007

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With summer heat rapidly approaching, the Tarrant Regional Water District wants to get tough on water users.

The regional water supplier is considering imposing strict conservation standards that could apply to more than 1.6 million water users in dozens of cities in North Texas -- including possible penalties for cities that don't do enough to cut consumption.

Residents across the region could face mandatory restrictions on when they water their lawns, trees and shrubs, possible bans on installing swimming pools under extreme drought conditions, and other rules aimed at curbing water-guzzling activities.

The proposal comes as cities across the area today kick off summer water restrictions. Most cities ask residents not to water their lawns or landscaping during the hottest part of the day, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. In about half the cities, the ban is mandatory.

For some, however, the proposed rules don't do enough to conserve the region's water resources.

"I wish it was tougher. I don't think it goes far enough," said Hal Sparks, the water district board's vice president. "I believe it is important that the customer cities agree to allow us to enforce these standards and that they agree to be bound by the standards we set up."

Some cities, however, are balking at turning over enforcement power, saying they read the meters and go door to door to enforce water use rules, although officials say they are willing to work with the water district on conservation.

"What are they going to do, have a separate water police that goes into everybody's town?" said Fort Worth Assistant City Manager Dale Fisseler. "I don't think it will work."

A public hearing on the water district's proposed plan is scheduled for June 11.

Water hogs

Fort Worth -- which buys water from the water district and then sells it to about 25 cities and other entities, including Dallas/Fort Worth Airport -- begins its seasonal mandatory water restrictions today, prohibiting residents from watering their lawns from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through Sept. 30.

Most other cities in Tarrant County will follow suit, although some go even farther. Arlington and Burleson have year-round restrictions on watering during those hours; both cities also require rain and freeze sensors on automatic sprinkler systems.

"The water situation is a potential future management disaster for North Texas if we do not plan and conserve our resources," said Arlington Councilman Robert Rivera. "This has to be a regional approach for it to be successful."

Even with the heavy spring rains and some local efforts, North Texas is still struggling with drought concerns, a rapidly growing population and a statewide reputation as a water hog.

As a wholesale water supplier, the water district is expected to serve as many as 3.4 million people in 11 counties by 2050.

To meet that anticipated demand, the district is seeking other sources of water, including building the Marvin Nichols Reservoir in East Texas and pumping millions of gallons of water out of three basins in south-central and southeastern Oklahoma.

Those efforts have met with considerable resistance since a state study indicated that Dallas and Fort Worth ranked first and second in consumption among Texas' largest cities, a finding that earned the area its water hog reputation.

That high rate of consumption led the Texas Legislature, during its recent session, to almost eliminate Marvin Nichols as a reservoir site. To encourage conservation, the Legislature passed a water bill that created a 23-member advisory council to monitor trends and technologies and to keep tabs on a statewide water-use program.

In North Texas, the water district saw storage capacity in its four reservoirs drop to 63 percent during the drought of the last two years, prompting officials to encourage its customer cities to adopt conservation efforts such as restricting watering between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

The net effect was an 11 percent drop in water use during the hottest months last summer, when more than half the water used is typically for outdoor purposes. But that meant only a 1 percent improvement in the reservoir storage capacity, water district officials said.

"It was like not having any drought plan at all," said Linda Christie, community and government relations director for the water district.

Conservation in stages

The proposed conservation regulations are initially aimed at cutting consumption by 5 percent. As drought conditions worsen, however, mandatory controls would kick in to slash usage by at least 20 percent.

The three-tiered plan is pegged to drought conditions. In a Stage 1 drought, expected to occur about once every four years, watering and other outdoor water use would be limited.

By Stage 3 -- which could happen once every 167 years, based on expected population levels by 2020 -- residents would be limited to watering only two hours a day by hand and would be unable to build swimming pools or refill existing pools or spas.

The Tarrant County area would have reached Stage 3 if the drought had continued until January.

Jack Stevens, secretary of the water board, said he thinks the proposed plan, under development for more than a year, is long overdue.

"I think it is an absolute perfect first step, and I wish we had had something like it earlier," Stevens said. "It just takes time."

Board member Marty Leonard, who campaigned for the board on a conservation platform, said more work needs to be done.

"I see it as a work in progress," Leonard said. "We are going to tweak that thing as it progresses."

Say 'please'

Although the district can establish tougher conservation measures, it has little real power to enforce them.

Under the proposal, a city or water district that does not take appropriate steps to cut back on consumption could initially be cited for a violation by the district in a letter.

If that doesn't work, the water district could publish an ad in the newspaper, perhaps embarrassing it into compliance.

If those efforts fail, the district could ask the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality to enforce the restrictions.

"We can't enforce anything," Christie said. "All we can do is say, 'Please.'"

Making conservation efforts a part of its contracts with local governments would be one way to establish consistent regulations throughout the area. But the district's longstanding contracts with its three biggest customers -- Fort Worth, Arlington and Mansfield -- can't be altered because they are the basis for bonds the district has sold to build its water distribution system.

Sparks supports the idea of asking its big three customers to sign separate water conservation contracts.

"I believe it is important that the customer cities agree to allow us to enforce these standards and they agree to be bound by the standards we set up," Sparks said.

Education efforts

Vic Henderson, water board president, along with board members Jim Lane, Leonard and Stevens, have been hesitant to take on enforcement beyond possibly making cities that use too much water pay a higher price.

Instead, they prefer emphasizing education, and the water district has just launched an aggressive advertising campaign that includes billboards and cable television spots as part of a \$490,000 public outreach this year.

Lane, a former Fort Worth City Council member, compared it to what the city went through when it started mandatory recycling. No matter what the city did, some people simply didn't comply. Water conservation will take public education, starting at the grade-school level, to be effective, he said.

"There is just so much government can do to make people responsible," Lane said.

Warren Brewer, a regional manager for the Trinity River Authority, another water district customer, said the authority has notified the five cities it serves that it is a reasonable plan.

"Consistency is what will make it successful," Brewer said.

Fort Worth Councilman Carter Burdette said he would be shocked if the district's city customers don't go with the flow.

"Frankly, I would be surprised if the customer cities had any quarrel with the concept of being more prudent with the use of water in the future," Burdette said. "All you have to do is look at the statistics."

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