

# Drought not water under bridge

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, June 24, 2007

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A week from today, city councils in Allen and Frisco will set their homeowners free.

People will get to water their yards twice a week, instead of once.

Oh, happy day.

For more than a year, many North Texas towns have been living under water restrictions because of recent drought conditions.

With plentiful spring rains, cities are gradually easing the restrictions. In Collin County, McKinney and Plano already unshackled homeowners and let them water twice a week.

Now that Lavon Lake, the area's primary water source, is full, I have a question:

Why should Collin County homeowners have *any* watering restrictions?

Hey, if you can afford the water bill, shouldn't you be allowed to water as much as you please?

Talk like that grieves local water department officials.

Gary Hartwell, Frisco's director of public works, has been preaching water conservation during the drought.

Now that it's over, he hasn't changed his message. Water remains a limited natural resource, he said.

"The whole issue is about not wasting water," Mr. Hartwell said. "We need to make all the water our folks need available to them, but that's all. We don't need to be seeing water running down the street."

The lingering drought, as unpleasant as it was, may have taught North Texas residents a valuable lesson and forever changed their watering habits.

At least, Mr. Hartwell hopes so.

So does Steve Massey, Allen's community services director.

Homeowners should realize they don't need to water their lawns every day, he said. An inch of water a week - that's all yards need.

People have inundated Mr. Massey with e-mails complaining about the once-a-week watering restriction. But some recent arrivals have been supportive.

"Maybe 5 or 10 percent of my e-mails are from people that came from California or Arizona or El Paso or San Antonio or Lubbock - places that have had water shortfalls for years," he said. "They say once-a-week watering has always been plenty.

"You water deep. The grass lives. It's not a big deal."

He hopes to hire a water education manager to spread the message of conservation.

"We want to start a program to penetrate the schools, the homeowners' associations, the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs," Mr. Massey said. "We're turning to a full-court press to reprogram people in the basic way they look at water and use water."

I hope people get the message.

Water has always been cheap, and it still is. Many people view water the way we used to view gasoline. We don't even think about how much we use.

Around here, folks love a thick carpet of St. Augustine grass, but it requires more water than many other types of grass.

McKinney has a good idea to educate people about drought-resistant landscaping. This summer, it will plant a 6,000-square-foot area off Eldorado Parkway with a variety of grasses that require little water.

"The idea is to have people stop and see what's been put down," said Hal Cranor, McKinney public works director. "We'll have signage that says, 'This plot of grass is this type of stuff, it requires this much water, this is how you plant it, this is where you get it, and so on.' "

I can already hear homeowners' associations screaming. They encourage uniformity in landscaping. Change is threatening.

Deal with it.

"I was in the Army," Mr. Cranor said. "I was stationed in the High Desert of California. If you had any grass, it was about the size of my desk here. The rest was brown and rocks and cactus.

"I don't think we have to go to that here in McKinney, but we could cut back some."

Mr. Cranor dropped a bombshell on me. He wants to keep the twice-a-week watering restrictions indefinitely.

"I'm going to recommend to the mayor and council that we never go back to watering seven days a week," he said. "Two-day-a-week watering is more than ample."

Brave man.

I hope the council listens to him. Maybe other cities will follow suit.

Watering any time you want isn't a God-given right.

*Ed Housewright writes about Collin County issues, and his column is published every other Sunday.*