

Below, find a town whose residential (not commercial) gpcd is 65 gallons a day.

AMY VICKERS

## Lawn binge

By Amy Vickers | June 10, 2007

BY VOLUME, America's biggest drinking problem isn't alcohol: It's lawn watering.

Home lawn and landscape irrigation consumes an average of more than 8 billion gallons of water daily, equivalent to 14 billion six-packs of beer. One-third of all residential water use in the United States is devoted to irrigation, estimates the US Environmental Protection Agency. Many cities and some states in the Southeast and Southwest, the country's fastest growing regions and those with the tightest water supplies, report that 50 percent of their residential water use is outdoors, primarily for lawns.

Massachusetts is following this trend with summertime water demands swelling to 50 percent or more, reports the Boston-based Metropolitan Area Planning Council, despite receiving more than 40 inches of precipitation annually -- more than plenty for a healthy lawn. Fast-growing suburban subdivisions in other New England states that hear the giant hissing sound of automatic irrigation sprinklers -- rain or shine -- ever more loudly are also grappling with or may soon be headlong on the same trajectory.

The extent to which our culture's irrigation-fueled lawn watering binge is acting like a wrecking ball in our rivers, streams, and lakes is a specific challenge to the security of our water supplies, even here in "water rich" New England. Nearly 70 percent of the river drainage basins in the Bay State are classified as "flow stressed," according to the Department of Conservation and Recreation, meaning they suffer from low flows and other problems.

Suburban communities are characterized increasingly by wide swatches of turf and automatic spray irrigation systems, many of which can pump thousands of gallons of water per hour. River basins in these areas have also witnessed the installation of more than 6,500 new unmetered residential irrigation wells between 2000 and 2005. Is a key suspect in this depleting of rivers not obvious?

Today, Massachusetts' once abundant freshwater supplies are straining from excessive if not abusive use. Two statewide water conservation actions are needed now to begin to reverse this trend. First, we need to limit the number of watering days allowed per week. Many healthy and attractive lawns and landscapes in New England do fine on rainfall alone once they are established. Native, drought-adaptive, and noninvasive plants and grasses are particularly suited to loving neglect when it comes to watering.

**The town of Franklin has had a once-a -week-only irrigation rule in effect since 2001, and green -- not brown -- lawns are the norm there. Franklin's irrigation schedule has dramatically reduced water waste, and the town's average residential water demand now meets the state's residential water conservation goal of 65 gallons per capita per day.** Further, Franklin's Kingsbury Pond, once depleted from 26 to 10 acres, is now at its highest level in 30 years. Franklin's current total water demand is about what it was in 2001, despite an increase of 5,000 new residents.

Second, lawn and landscape watering rules must apply equally no matter the water source -- public supplies or private wells. Exempting property owners with private wells from necessary restrictions on nonessential lawn watering acts as an incentive for more homeowners to drill private irrigation wells, a dynamic that only worsens ground and surface water depletion. At least two Massachusetts towns, Middleton and Bourne, have wisely passed local ordinances that require watering restrictions to also apply to private wells, effectively putting a cap on the high water withdrawals associated with wells.

If Massachusetts and other New England states act soon, we need not be fated to the long-term water shortages and chronic droughts now predicted for much of the nation. By reining in our collective lawn water drinking binge through sensible rules and fixing the loophole that allows uncontrolled irrigation by residential private well owners, we can triumphantly restore our now declining water legacy.

**Amy Vickers** is an Amherst-based engineer, water conservation consultant, and author of "Handbook of Water Use and Conservation: Homes, Landscapes, Businesses, Industries, Farms."

© [Copyright](#) 2007 The New York Times Company

*FAIR USE NOTICE*

*This document contains copyrighted material whose use has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. The Texas Living Waters Project, which is a nonprofit undertaking, is making this article available in our efforts to promote comprehensive water planning in Texas. We believe that this constitutes a "fair use" of the copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. If you wish to use this copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond "fair use", you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.*