

# [Time to conserve water is now](#)

By [The Editorial Board](#) | Sunday, November 18, 2007, 05:37 PM

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Water will be in the twenty-first century what oil was in the twentieth century.

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Global water shortages are changing the landscape - literally and figuratively - of modern life everywhere. But there is always someone too rich, too arrogant or too unaware to get it.

From the 13 desalination plants being built in California to Austin's newly imposed mandatory restrictions on water use, governments are taking the water shortage seriously. And well they should.

Lakes are drying up in Georgia and being depleted in Florida. Water restrictions are being imposed from Seattle to Miami as a way to reduce consumption of this fast-evaporating resource. The news last week, though, was about those who didn't notice or don't care.

The Atlanta area has been in the grip of a drought so prolonged that the governor recently had a prayer vigil for rain on the Capitol steps. Yet one wealthy estate owner in neighboring Cobb County used 440,000 gallons of precious water in one month, about 14,700 gallons a day, according to news reports. The average homeowner uses about 150 gallons a day.

Chris Carlos, an investor, used most of the water to irrigate his lush, four-acre estate. Carlos, whose water bill averages \$1,200 a month, said he didn't realize how much water he was using. He apologized and promised to reduce consumption.

In Palm Beach, Fla., that redoubt of wealth and privilege, the mansions' grounds remain green though the city's water source, Lake Okeechobee, is five feet below its desired level. According to The Wall Street Journal, one wealthy estate owner there used almost 21 million gallons of water over the past 12 months. His average of 57,000 gallons a day is more than average families use in a year.

Most of that water is used for landscaping, a huge drain on any community's water supply. Austin's newly imposed restrictions on landscape watering for commercial and multi-family properties has some of the owners and managers begging for relief. The restrictions don't apply to single-family homes until next May.

Each user is different and there may be good cause for exemptions in certain cases, but Austin is right to mandate water conservation before a crisis occurs. The task force that formulated the restrictions was charged with finding ways to reduce consumption by 1 percent a year for the next 10 years, and watering limits are a big part of that effort.

The city's capacity for treating water is 285 million gallons a day, and peak use has reached a record 247 million gallons a day. That's too close for comfort until the city completes a new treatment facility, which is years in the future.

Conserving water requires all of us to reconsider the landscape - again, literally and figuratively. It means changing our behavior, from how long we shower to what kinds of shrubs and grasses we plant.

City government has effective tools at its disposal, too. It can increase costs for big users, impose penalties for excessive water use and offer rebates for water-saving changes like xeriscaping and better plumbing.

If water is the new oil, we need to be conserving it now. It's only going to be more expensive later. Have you noticed what you're paying at the gas pump these days?

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