

COMMENTARY

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Make effort to conserve water

Unlike in the Wild West, modern water fights are relatively civil matters, playing out in courthouses and legislative committee rooms. But that civility—and the Texas economy—may well be threatened if Texans don't start treating fresh water as the finite, limited resource that it is.

Two things will make the status quo unsustainable: First, the Texas population is projected to double over the next 50 years. Second, many experts predict that global climate change will likely bring longer and more severe droughts. Indeed, much of the state has recently had a sobering glimpse of that future.

Facing this challenge, Texas lawmakers—recognizing that improving the efficiency of our urban water use is key to any hope of meeting Texas' future water needs—have in recent sessions mandated increased water conservation planning by Texas cities, where most of the population growth will occur.

Recently, Environmental Defense Fund took a look at how these conservation and water efficiency plans are being implemented in practice by examining in detail the 2005 municipal water conservation plans for 18 cities across the state.

We found that the quality and scope of the plans vary significantly. A few of the plans—and their early results—represent some of the most progressive municipal water conservation efforts in the country. Others—in fact, most of the plans—lack aggressive conservation targets or fail to incorporate the full range of readily available price and non-price conservation measures and technologies.

For example, very few plans incorporated the state-recommended efficiency target of 140 gallons of water per capita per day (gpcd). Some cities had five- and 10-year targets of more than 200

gallons per capita per day; one even set its target at a whopping 300 gpcd. These higher targets don't inspire confidence that the need to improve efficiency is being taken seriously.

Studies show that proper price incentives are the quickest, most effective way to promote water conservation at the municipal level, and many cities do charge an escalating amount per gallon as water consumption increases (known as “conservation pricing”). However, conservation incentives are largely limited to the lower end of the rate scale; very few rate structures include higher prices per gallon when monthly use exceeds the state's recommended level for a household of four—16,800 gallons/month. That means the per-gallon rates usually aren't any higher for a family of four using 50,000



gallons a month than for a careful family that limits its consumption to the state's target. In short, the ordinances do little to discourage water hogs. There's room for substantial improvement, without affecting those who already use water wisely.

A few cities instituted well-received programs that provide rebates or other assistance to homeowners and businesses that install more water-efficient appliances, but this proven means of reducing consumption has yet to be widely applied.

Wider adoption of efficient water-use technologies, more sophisticated pricing incentives to encourage conservation and greater public awareness of the need to conserve are all essential if we're to meet future municipal needs while still preserving healthy rivers and streams for future generations of Texans.

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