

WATER CONSERVATION

Austin's water conservation efforts move forward

Less-thirsty lawns one tool among new rules aimed at saving resource, money.

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The competing story lines of water conservation and green lawns play out in a single blade of grass that traces its roots to Asia.

Two years ago, the hardy zoysia grass sold at \$120 a pallet at King Ranch Turfgrass; now it's \$190 a pallet, and sales have doubled over the past four years.

Zac Pettiette, the manager at the Southwest Austin store, said, "The top question we get from customers is if the grass is drought-tolerant."

Lawns are emerging as the chief proving ground for water conservation efforts in cities across Texas, especially in Austin.

With populations growing and water resources shrinking, attention is turning to how cities are cutting down use at the hose and the faucet. The state water plan predicts that by 2060, cities will more than double the amount of water they used in 2000.

New water conservation rules in Austin, prompted by concerns about long-term water supply, took effect Thursday: During the summer, homeowners may not use sprinklers between 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. and not more than twice a week. Violations are a Class C misdemeanor and can lead to fines. Homeowners can water by hand-held hose or bucket any time of day and any day of the week.

Cutting back on using potable water saves cities the cost of building new water treatment plants, prepares for population growth even as water supplies dwindle while temperatures rise, keeps more water in rivers for fish and wildlife and lightens individual water bills.

Austinites use 172 gallons per person per day, more than the 142 gallons used by San Antonio residents but less than the 244 gallons consumed by their counterparts in Dallas, according to 2005 data from the Texas Water Development Board. The reasons come down to price, city ordinances, conservation measures and demographics.

Wealthier areas, which typically sport bigger lawns than poorer counterparts, tend to use more water.

Austin's top 1,000 individual water consumers, for instance, are concentrated in the western and northwestern parts of the city, according to Daryl Slusher, a former Austin City Council member and now the assistant director for environmental affairs and conservation at Austin Water Utility.

Austin — like Arlington, Beaumont and Dallas — has a pricing program that charges households the same rate for every gallon over 15,000 gallons per month. Such pricing gives little incentive for the biggest consumers of water to cut back, according a recently released Environmental Defense Fund report.

San Antonio, which has sliced its water use from about 160 gallons per person per day in 1993, has become something of a model of water conservation. Among the changes: New home builders can plant only city-approved, drought-tolerant grasses.

Austin has a host of programs to encourage residents to cut water use, and it is investing in a reclaimed water program that will pipe cleaned-up sewage water for lawn irrigation. But down the road, cutting water use could require some shifts in lifestyle, like taking shorter showers, boiling less water for pasta or abandoning green lawns, according to conservationists.

"It's so easy for individuals to take it in, to say, 'Yes, I should do something about it,' " Robert Puente, the retiring Democratic state representative from San Antonio told a water policy conference in April. "But I should also diet."

How much water do we use?

Dallas 244 gallons per person per day

Austin 172

El Paso 166

Houston 166

San Antonio 142

Source: Texas Water Development Board, 2005 data

Rebates and incentives

The City of Austin sells rainwater collection barrels, gives away high-efficiency toilets, shower heads and faucet fixtures and has rebates for efficient clothes washers and rainwater harvesting systems.

Austin also offers rebates of up to \$40,000 to industrial, commercial and institutional customers for installing new equipment and processes that conserve water at existing facilities. Some projects may also qualify for property or sales tax exemptions or other incentives.

For more information, visit www.ci.austin.tx.us/watercon or call 974-2199.

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