

Drought-plagued Georgia to get insight from SAWS

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By Jerry Needham
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Officials in Georgia, facing a third summer of drought with many residents prohibited from using any water outdoors, are calling on their colleagues from the San Antonio Water System to preach the conservation message to an Atlanta conference next week.

“One thing we're going to tell them is that managing a drought is not the same thing as planning for long-term conservation,” said Karen Guz, director of conservation for SAWS. “I'm concerned that a lot of the utilities in Georgia, their only experience with something resembling conservation has been managing this really terrible drought.”

The drought that started in the spring of 2006 has left lakes and rivers in the southeastern United States far below normal levels. It's led to a near-statewide ban on outdoor watering in Georgia, lawsuits between states over water allocations and the closure of water-related businesses such as plant nurseries and irrigation system installers.

Guz will be among more than a half-dozen people that SAWS is taking to the two-day conference that starts Wednesday, “Can Water Efficiency Really Work for a Water System's Bottom Line?”

SAWS pitched the idea of a half-day seminar to Georgia officials, who liked the idea so much they gathered other sponsors and made it a two-day affair, Guz said.

SAWS, which started its conservation programs in the mid-1990s, has for a half-dozen years been used as a model around Texas and the nation for getting residents involved in conserving water, saving the utility and its customers money.

Among the SAWS programs are: a tiered pricing structure; strict lawn-watering rules; free low-flow toilet distribution programs; free or low-cost plumbing repairs for low-income households; and rebates for installation of low-water use landscapes and clothes washers.

Also speaking at the conference will be SAWS' chief financial officer and some of the stakeholders who have helped make San Antonio's conservation efforts so successful, Guz said. Those include representatives from the hotel industry, the green industry, the car wash industry and an office/industrial water expert, she said.

SAWS interim President and former state Rep. Robert Puente will be the first-day luncheon's keynote speaker, detailing some of the initiatives that the Texas Legislature has used to move conservation along and delivering the message that conservation works to structure supplies, especially when there are challenges to expanding other sources, she said.

“The situation that they're dealing with is kind of an interesting flashback to San Antonio in the early 1990s,” said SAWS spokeswoman Anne Hayden. “There's a lot of attention being focused on the mussels being fed by water being released from a reservoir. We had our blind salamander. What happened in San Antonio was people realized it wasn't just about the endangered species, it was about managing our water resources so they would be available for the long term.”

Travel and hotel expenses for the SAWS contingent are funded through a \$10,000 grant that came with an Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy

School of Government for the utility's conservation programs. Other expenses for the SAWS group will be picked up by conference sponsors, Guz said.

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