

Austin officials say regulations cut water usage

Rules put Austin on pace to meet long-term conservation goals.

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One year in, Austin's water-conservation measures have produced the result city officials say they had hoped for.

After the city passed stricter restrictions on lawn watering, Austin used almost 5 percent less water than previous estimates had forecast. The city was on pace to pump a record amount of water through its pipes during a summer in the near future, possibly the one just past.

But, at least partly because of the conservation measures, Austin stayed well below its record even during the unusually hot, dry summer of 2008, city officials say.

"People responded to this plan," said Daryl Slusher, head of the Austin Water Utility's conservation department.

Some environmental activists say even that assessment is too cautious. Bill Bunch, head of the Save Our Springs Alliance, is among those who say Austin has now proven it can live on less water and doesn't need the new and controversial water-treatment plant the city says it still plans to build.

City officials and environmental activists are pleased because peak pumpage - the stick by which city officials measure water use - had been expected to hit 240 million gallons on Austin's thirstiest day as early as last summer. Projected over the next decade, a trend of increasing water use seemed likely to put Austin uncomfortably close to hitting its maximum pumping capacity of 285 million gallons a day, said Greg Meszaros, the director of the water utility.

But instead of peaking at 240 million gallons, Austin topped out at 229 million gallons. The doomsday scenario - Austin needing more water than it can provide in the next decade - has gone from unlikely to highly improbable as a result, according to water-utility officials.

They cannot say the restrictions are solely responsible for the drop. The utility has been encouraging its customers to conserve, and general public awareness probably contributed, water officials say. That dynamic has manifested itself elsewhere; electricity use was also slightly lower last summer compared with summer 2006, which was comparably hot, according to Austin Energy.

Whatever the specific reasons for why Austin used less water, other measures show the city is in better shape than it otherwise might have been. In addition to peak demand being down, the average summer day saw Austin pump 4.4 percent less water than the city did in summer 2006.

The first conservation step actually started in October 2007, when the city began limiting watering on commercial and apartment complexes to use before 10 a.m. and after 7 p.m., and then only twice a week. Some property-management groups objected, saying the apartments and office buildings had relatively complicated issues that required more time to sort out. Thus far, five commercial users have been fined for violations, water utility spokesman Kevin Buchman said.

The same restrictions applied to homes during the summer, although no homeowners were fined, Buchman said. He said the city focused on warnings and education and would probably continue that approach this summer.

The apparent success of the measures has given some environmental activists new fodder for their argument that the city does not need to build a new water-treatment plant.

The city put the water-conservation measures in place partly to buy time to change the location of the proposed \$500 million plant.

After a fight over whether to build it at the headwaters of environmentally fragile Bull Creek, the city decided to move the plant but worried the delay would push the opening date to 2014, causing a water pinch.

The city has since selected a new site in Northwest Austin, at the corner of RM 620 and Bullick Hollow Road, and judging by this summer's water use, "We've bought ourselves the time we need," Meszaros said.

Bunch said the conservation plan has been so successful that the plant can be pushed back years, and might not be necessary at all.

As evidence, he points to summer 2005, the time water-utility officials say the city hit its peak-pumpage record of 247 million gallons in a day.

"The city added 100,000 customers between then and now, and the peak still went down 8 or 9 percent," Bunch said. "They just can't justify the plant. I think they're trying to creatively deny their own success to get it built."

The city could also save \$14.3 million a year by delaying the plant, according to a November 2008 letter to the City Council from Bunch, Sierra Club representatives and other environmental groups. Bunch also said other upcoming conservation measures, such as a plant near the former Mueller airport that will take treated effluent and distribute it for non-drinking purposes, should further reduce Austin's water needs, as could the city fixing pipes that have been leaking billions of gallons a year.

Meszaros said Bunch's analysis is flawed for several reasons.

For instance, he said, this summer might have been one of the hottest and driest on record, but rain still fell every few weeks, and with each rainfall came a major drop in water use, probably from people cutting back on lawn watering. Next summer could conceivably be worse, even if it's not as hot, because there could be longer dry spells or people could find ways to use more water under the new rules, Maszeros said.

"To take one years' worth of data and say that's the long-term trend is not a prudent analysis," Meszaros said. "We're not going to pull out one of these rabbits every year."

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