

Water cops try to cork the waste

[By Vianna Davila](#)- Express-News

Evidence was scattered on the street.

Beneath the scattered clouds, the clues sat undisturbed: Fresh stains on the asphalt; small streams flowing down the sidewalk and over the curb, collecting in pools; grass still moist from a recent — prohibited — sprinkler shower.

But the deputy's hands were tied. The offending sprinkler no longer was running in this far Northwest Bexar County neighborhood, and so, at least for now, the violators would not be cited.

One week after Stage 2 water restrictions went into effect in Bexar County — for the first time in three years and amid a drought that has lasted several seasons — local water agencies have responded by dispatching enforcement squads.

Composed of off-duty San Antonio police officers and Bexar County sheriff's deputies, the squads are tasked with monitoring water use by patrolling hundreds of streets, seeking residents who, despite rapidly dropping aquifer levels, continue to water their lawns illegally.

“It's a different type of policing you could say,” said Bexar County Sheriff's Deputy George Barrera, who's worked part-time for BexarMet as a water enforcement officer for the past three years.

With Stage 3 restrictions looming, no rainfall in the immediate forecast and temperatures expected to top 100 degrees this week, the utilities have launched a public relations campaign, urging residents to be mindful of their water use. Postcards have been mailed reminding users of the once-a-week watering rules.

During the afternoons and again in the middle of the night, when residents aren't allowed to water, the squads make the rounds. On a good day, Barrera can cover about five subdivisions during a four-hour shift.

Citywide, since Stage 1 restrictions began in April, San Antonio Water Systems officials have given more than 5,000 warnings to residents, said Mario Aguilar, a SAWS spokesman. Since about Memorial Day, the utility has issued about 400 citations for water violations.

Those cited must appear in municipal court, Aguilar said.

BexarMet issues tickets only after suspected violators have received a warning. So far, the utility has noted about 200 violations since Stage 1 restrictions were triggered, said

Nathan Riggs, BexarMet's manager for water efficiency and community relations.

Of those, about 14 residents were issued citations.

"We don't like to be the bad guys," Riggs said. But "swimming pools, washing cars and watering lawns is not an important use of water right now. That's a use of water that's kind of a luxury for us. Would you rather to be able to flush your toilet or water your grass?"

Fines range from \$100 for the first violation to \$1,000 for a third in BexarMet coverage areas. For SAWS customers, the range is \$50 to \$1,000.

On Friday, Barrera spent his evening driving a BexarMet truck, passing through new subdivisions in far Northwest Bexar County, where the manicured lawns typically are green. Areas on the North Side rack up some of the city and county's highest water use, officials said, partly because large subdivisions have irrigation systems that use more water.

Often, Barrera said, customers don't realize their sprinkler systems are timed to water during the restricted hours. Stage 2 restrictions prohibit watering between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. and from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m.

They quickly apologize, he said, when they see the deputy at their door.

"They get scared," Barrera said, after waving to a woman holding a water hose, which is allowed at any time under the Stage 2 rules. "Sometimes they turn off the water and sometimes they run inside."

During his shift, Barrera cited a few housing developers for violations at model homes, but for most of the afternoon he issued no tickets — perhaps, he said, a good sign the water rules are sticking.

But then he spotted a house with an address not allowed to water on Fridays. As he noted the incident, the homeowner, out on a jog, sprinted up to the house and the sprinklers abruptly shut off. Barrera explained the restrictions and issued a warning to the man.

While BexarMet only sends out uniformed off-duty officers and deputies like Barrera, 15 to 20 specially trained SAWS employees initially look for violators within that agency's coverage area.

The job can be tedious. On Saturday, during the balmy early morning darkness, a time when many homeowners try to sneak in watering, SAWS technical field investigator Adolph Garcia slowly drove through a cluster of neighborhoods near Churchill High School.

It was after 2 a.m., and he managed to note a few violations, including a running

sprinkler, hidden among a cluster of jasmine. He noted the time and address and later would sign an affidavit verifying the incident.

The homeowner likely was sleeping, his lawn receiving a rare shower. But eventually, a law enforcement officer will follow up with a citation.

The goal never has been punishment, Garcia said, but awareness. The aquifer is only going to last as long as people protect it.

As for those precious, emerald green lawns, Garcia said, “your grass is gonna come back.”

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