



Conserving water is a hot topic during drought

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July 6, 2009, 10:58AM

Signs asking residents to restrict outdoor water use are popping up across northwest Harris County.

With most of that section of the county located outside of a municipality, except for Tomball and Jersey Village, local municipal utility districts and private water companies must monitor their customers' water usage, which typically rises during the summer months or a drought.

Water Savings Summit

Several water providers recently gathered at the "Water Savings Summit," which is part of a Water Conservation Workshop Series sponsored by a entities involved in the regional water realm, including the North Harris County Regional Water Authority, West Harris County Regional Water Authority, Harris-Galveston Coastal Subsidence District, San Jacinto River Authority, North Fort Bend Water Authority, The Woodlands Joint Powers Agency, Lone Star Groundwater Conservation District, Houston Gulf Coast Irrigation Association and Water Lily Press.

Looking ahead

Discussion focused on launching a long-term conservation program. The collective message delivered by several keynote speakers, many of whom hail from regions that regularly face water shortage problems, was that conservation measures enacted during a drought should be incorporated into residents' daily lives. In short, all Texans, including Houstonians, should live as if they are experiencing a permanent drought.

"We have always tried to separate drought from conservation," said Carole Baker, director of governmental affairs for the Harris-Galveston Coastal Subsidence District and executive director of the Texas Water Foundation. "To me, conservation means permanent strategies initiated in a drought. We need to always plan that we will be in a drought situation and keep these strategies going."

The majority of water providers at the conference represented MUDs and companies that do business in northwest Harris County. Many said they were looking to develop conservation plans.

Many said they were on the verge of seeking voluntary compliance from residents to scale back on outdoor water use during this drought, but they had not done so because they had not reached a "trigger point" in the drought plan. That often occurs when "peak demand" meets or exceeds 80 percent of a district's daily water supply.

Joe Myers, Harris County MUD 365 president, said the two water districts that serve the Coles Crossing community off U.S. 290 and Barker-Cypress Road had not yet put out the signs, but residents were being asked to conserve outdoor water usage

Jim Beavers, a Harris County MUD 120 director, said his district in west Harris County would discuss the possibility of enacting voluntary drought measures at a July board meeting.

John Sutton, at Texas Water Development board member who supervises that agency's municipal water conservation section, said many water providers in the Houston region do not consider conservation because periods of drought are few and far between.

"I believe most entities in state are ready for drought," Sutton said. "The challenge is getting customers to remember those conservation methods after the rain comes and the drought is over."

The hope, Sutton said, is that residents will put pressure on water districts and municipalities to make conservation a part of normal operating procedure.

"Drought hits us hard, but it gives us great opportunities to increase awareness among customers," he said.

Two speakers at the workshop, Karen Guz, San Antonio Water System's director of conservation, and Carole Davis, Dallas Water Utilities conservation program manager, provided insight on enacting conservation programs.

Guz said San Antonio exists in a permanent state of drought punctuated by occasional flooding. The city looks to the Edwards Aquifer for its water supply, and is working to stave off the need to tap into new water supplies and the expensive projects that will come along with them.

The city is close to entering "Stage 3" of its drought management plan. In that stage, she said, the city's access its supply of water from the Edwards Aquifer is reduced, and residents and businesses are only allowed to irrigate yards and landscaping every other week during restricted hours.

"Long-term conservation is at top of our list of strategies," Guz said.

Dallas ran out of water during a drought from 1951-57, and city leaders were determined to prevent that from happening again, Davis said. A system of six inter-connected lakes was developed to supply the city and its customers.

Amy Vickers, a water conservation expert who provided the keynote speech at the workshop, said Harris County water providers could develop a cooperative to get conservation efforts started by sharing information and skills.

"Water conservation is an art and science," Vickers said. "We have all learned by trial and error. If you have questions, I recommend calling up other water conservation managers."

Diane Flynn, a Post Wood MUD director, said her district has been working on instilling conservation techniques for several years.

Flynn said the Post Wood district has tracked customers' water usage since 2002 and has seen a decline in that time period. She said the district's goal is to have residents reduce their water usage the entire year and use water during summer months in a responsible way, especially during droughts.

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