

Water conservation a habit we must keep

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It's difficult to avoid the message the Austin Water Utility is spreading these days: Conserve water. Ray Benson, leader of the band Asleep at the Wheel, sings a conservation message urging us to watch our water "like it was your son or daughter." Former television anchor Jason Hill preaches a conservation sermon in English and Spanish.

The unbroken drought underscores the need to conserve, and the utility's customers get it. Austin enacted Stage 2 water restrictions Sept. 6. City water customers responded by using 100 million fewer gallons of water during the first week of the new watering restrictions, compared with the week before the restrictions began. An even greater sign that we've become more conservation-minded: PolitiFact Texas reported last week that our single-day water use peaked more than 10 years ago, on Aug. 13, 2001, when we used 240.3 million gallons. We have not used as much water in a single day since, despite the fact our city's population has grown by 20.4 percent.

A commendable record, indeed, but then, conservation is usually an easy sell to a community that espouses a careful husbanding of natural resources.

Austin water utility customers historically have practiced conservation — so much so that opponents of Water Treatment Plant 4 used that history in trying to delay construction of the facility. Conservation, though important, won't be enough to meet future demands of a growing area, though. Just because Austinites aggressively conserve doesn't mean we won't need infrastructure. And just because we'll have new treatment capacity doesn't mean we can let up on conservation.

Stage 2 restrictions are the city's response to exceptional drought conditions. Commercial and residential customers may use automatic sprinkler systems or hose-end sprinklers only once a week during limited times. Water when you're not scheduled to and you might face a fine of

\$475.

Try to ignore the restrictions and your neighbors or passersby are increasingly likely to report you. As the American-Statesman's Ricardo Gàndara reported recently, the city received 675 water waste complaints during the first week of Stage 2 restrictions, a 13 percent increase over the same Stage 2 period in 2009. Sometimes the fear of a fine can reinforce good habits.

We haven't seen a steady rain since last September, and the 11 months from October through August were the driest on record for the city. It was also the hottest summer on record for Austin; statewide, it was the hottest summer in the nation's history, according to the National Weather Service. But we don't need a weatherman to tell us how much the sweat flowed.

No greater manifestation of the severity of the drought exists than the devastating wildfires this month in Bastrop County. Drought endangers lives, destroys crops and forces ranchers to sell livestock. For city dwellers who own homes, drought kills lawns and landscaping, harming property values.

The current drought eventually will end — we think. But even if rain starts to fall in the next few weeks, the record-setting droughts of 2009 and this year should be reminders that if we're not currently in a drought, we're always on the brink of one.

All droughts, no matter their duration or severity, require smart water management. And smart water management isn't limited to those in charge of our water supplies. We shouldn't take water for granted — ever — even during wet periods.

Shorter showers, fewer flushes and adding more drought-tolerant lawns — the city's water utility recently announced rebates to help customers replace lawns with St. Augustine grass, which, let's be honest, never had any business being grown in Central Texas in the first place — are just a few things we can do to save water.

And the more we change the way we use water, the more water conservation becomes something we just do.

One week of restricted watering, 100 million gallons saved.

Conservation works. And in the case of our most valuable resource, it should be routine.

Hit it, Ray.

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