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Watering restrictions could become permanent in DFW

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BY BILL HANNA

billhanna@star-telegram.com

If the mayors of four North Texas cities have their way, twice-a-week watering restrictions may become the norm for almost all of the Metroplex.

Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price raised the issue of keeping the restrictions as part of the water conservation plan and said she's had discussions with Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings, Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck and Irving Mayor Beth Van Duyne about a coordinated regional approach.

Rawlings said that he also favors keeping twice-a-week restrictions and that Dallas will have further discussions in April.

"Mayor Price and I have been talking about lots of initiatives together, and water is one of them," Rawlings said. "I think water conservation is probably the most important issue we have in the next three decades. We cannot continue to grow without water, and I want to continue to grow."

In May or June, a revised ordinance is expected to be presented to the Fort Worth City Council that will include twice-a-week restrictions as an option.

"The regional approach to conservation would probably go a long way," Price said. "We just simply have to think about conservation, and landscape watering is one of the biggest users."

When twice-a-week restrictions were implemented in August, the Tarrant Regional Water District saw an 8 percent decline in average daily use, which saved 35 million to 45 million gallons per day.

The district provides raw water to 98 percent of residents in Tarrant County, including Fort Worth, Arlington and Mansfield.

"The goal is to reduce excessive outdoor watering and water waste, especially during peak summer months when rain is scarce and demands are high," said Linda Christie, the district's government and community relations director.

"The savings here in North Texas would be tremendous -- millions of gallons of highly treated drinking water per day, billions of gallons per year."

Besides twice-a-week restrictions, water providers are discussing doing more to make the limits as similar as possible in each city.

Price noted that nurseries and other businesses that operate in several cities have challenges understanding the different rules and explaining them to customers.

Arlington Councilman Jimmy Bennett, who serves on the water district's Wholesale Customer Advisory Committee, said he would support making the restrictions permanent.

"What the restrictions on landscape irrigation have taught us is that proper maintenance of one's yard doesn't require the level of watering we once thought," according to the experts, Bennett said.

The Trinity River Authority said it would encourage its five Tarrant County customers -- Colleyville, North Richland Hills, Bedford, Euless and Grapevine -- to follow the twice-a-week rules if the Tarrant district recommends the measure.

But communities "would have the autonomy at the individual city level to decide" whether to follow the restrictions, spokeswoman Michelle Clark said.

Officials with Colleyville and North Richland Hills said they haven't discussed the issue. North Richland Hills spokeswoman Mary Peters said the city will likely follow the lead of Fort Worth and the authority on the issue since it buys water from both entities.

The Fort Worth Water Department has 30 wholesale customers, including Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, Southlake, Hurst, Burleson and Crowley. Its contract requires customers to follow whatever rules the city implements itself.

Praise for the plan

Environmental groups responded warmly to the news that some Metroplex cities are considering making twice-a-week restrictions permanent.

Ken Kramer, head of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club, said that the region has taken positive steps in recent years to shed its reputation as a water hog and that permanent restrictions would go even further.

"I think it's a great idea," Kramer said. "I think the one thing that needs to be looked at pretty closely is whether or not twice-a-week watering might be sometimes problematic. You might actually see water use go up.

"I think you have to couple this with an education process. People really need to understand how much they need to water."

Austin implemented once-a-week residential watering restrictions in September to counteract the drought.

Now Austin Water, which provides water to a population of 892,000 in the Austin area, is rewriting its rules to make twice-a-week restrictions permanent, spokeswoman Drema Gross said.

"We can see in our pumpage numbers how the majority of the citizens are following the restrictions," she said.

Irving joins effort

One area city that had been working on its own is now interested in joining the group effort.

The mayor of Irving, which tried unsuccessfully to broker its own water deal with Hugo, Okla., said the city is ready to work with others.

The U.S. Supreme Court recently declined to hear a lawsuit that resulted from the proposed deal, upholding a lower court's ruling that Hugo couldn't sell water without Oklahoma's permission.

"I think we need to have a strong regional partnership on water issues," Van Duyne said.

"It just makes a whole lot of sense for us to work together."

Staff writer Susan Schrock contributed to this report.

Bill Hanna, 817-390-7698

Twitter: [@fwhanna](https://twitter.com/fwhanna)

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