

Tighter water rules should be norm

Editorial Board

Updated: 7:44 p.m. Monday, Sept. 10, 2012
Published: 7:10 p.m. Monday, Sept. 10, 2012

We were surprised and puzzled when the city lifted its once-a-week watering restrictions in July. Sure, this year has been wetter than expected, with the rainfall total at Camp Mabry since Jan. 1 currently almost 3 inches above average. But Central Texas remains in drought.

Thus it was no surprise last week when the city was forced to reverse course and again limit watering to once a week. As we've written before, if Central Texas isn't in drought then it's on the edge of drought. No matter how wet a year has been, drought looms.

The city should consider making its once-a-week watering restrictions the new normal. And Austin's watering restrictions shouldn't be set to tighten when lake levels drop to a certain point; instead, they should be set to loosen only when lake levels rise to near-full or full.

As the American-Statesman's Marty Toohey reported in Saturday's editions, complaints from homeowners about their dying landscaping along with lake levels that, while low, were no longer critical prompted Mayor Lee Leffingwell and City Manager Marc Ott to lift the once-a-week restrictions July 16.

Leffingwell, defending the decision, told Toohey that the city's rules require it to move from one watering stage to the next when lake capacity reaches certain levels. He dismissed concerns the city's quick shift from one stage to the next and back again would confuse residents.

"I see nothing wrong with going back and forth," Leffingwell told Toohey. "It's how the policy is written and I think the city has handled the situation exactly as it should have and with common sense."

Lake levels trigger Austin's watering restrictions. Stage 2, once-a-week watering rules take effect when Lakes Buchanan and Travis drop to a combined 900,000 acre-feet. The lakes were at 983,000 acre-feet, which is only about 49 percent full, when the city relaxed its Stage 2 rules in July.

Buchanan and Travis currently hold 882,531 acre-feet, according to the Lower Colorado River Authority. An acre-foot of water is about 326,000 gallons, about the amount three typical Central Texas households use in a year.

When the city returned to twice-a-week watering in July it did so with new limits on the hours watering was allowed. Those changes, an improvement on the old limits, have been tweaked slightly since but still hold.

Homeowners have invested time and money in their landscaping, but in many cases that landscaping is ill fit for Central Texas' climate. St. Augustine is a popular grass, to name the most visible example, but it's a coastal grass; those thick, lush lawns come at a watering price.

Concerns that the Stage 2 watering restrictions were jeopardizing the city's trees earn greater sympathy. Twelve hundred trees on city land died last year because of drought conditions, according to city estimates.

Stage 2 restrictions allowed for hand watering at any time. Recent changes to the policy also allow exemptions for drip irrigation to water trees and gardens. Drip irrigation is more efficient than sprinklers and loses less water to evaporation and runoff.

Some homeowners began drilling private water wells and tapping into the Edwards Aquifer to water their lawns and circumvent the city's watering restrictions. The increase in the number of private water wells over the past two years prompted the Austin City Council to pass a resolution last month ordering Ott to develop a registry of wells drilled on properties served by the Austin Water Utility, a move we supported. No permit is currently required to drill a well inside the city; that needs to change.

Nothing about the region's water situation justified July's watering decision. The city's quick return to once-a-week watering after only seven weeks underscores how quickly the benefits of good rains can vanish in Central Texas. That is the drought's enduring lesson.

Find this article at:

<http://www.statesman.com/opinion/tighter-water-rules-should-be-norm-2455096.html>

FAIR USE NOTICE This document contains copyrighted material whose use has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. The Texas Living Waters Project, which is a nonprofit undertaking, is making this article available in our efforts to promote comprehensive water planning in Texas. We believe that this constitutes a "fair use" of the copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. If you wish to use this copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond "fair use", you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.