

# Valley schools cut use of water, invest in conservation methods

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By Hannah Furfaro

Facing stricter city water rules and a deepening drought, some Valley schools are pumping money into water-efficient landscaping, low-flow bathroom fixtures and sprinkler repairs.

Schools are some of the biggest water consumers in the city — Fresno Unified, for example, used 3.5 million gallons last school year. So school officials say they're taking extra steps to keep consumption in check. Many campuses are now equipped with the latest low-flow devices. Some are using synthetic turf instead of grass to cover athletic fields.

And new city regulations that slash the number of days schools can legally water grass have caused some districts to get creative. Once allowed to keep sprinklers pumping six days a week, Fresno Unified and Central Unified schools have cut that number in half. (Schools still get to water more often than the two-day rule for homeowners because their lots are larger.)

City officials say they're pleased with school districts' efforts, but are keeping a close eye on all water users, public and private alike.

"If there are egregious violations, then we're going to fine," Fresno city spokesman Mark Standriff said. "Everyone is susceptible if they are flagrantly or intentionally violating the water rules."

## **New ways to conserve**

Landscapers at McLane High raked fresh dirt and spread mulch around the base of a dozen crepe myrtle saplings on Friday, newly planted trees with red-and-white flowers that match the school's colors perfectly.

The trees replace a cluster of magnolias and redwoods that once stood at the school's entry way. They come with a simple promise, said Steve Hauschel, an estimator for Clean Cut Landscape.

"They're smaller trees, they use less water," he said.

Keeping in mind Gov. Jerry Brown's plea to all Californians to cut water use by 20% this year, Fresno Unified officials say they're finding more creative ways to save.

Karin Temple, the district's associate superintendent for operations and facilities, says the per-capita (students and employees) average use at Fresno Unified's 106 schools is 44 gallons of water per school day.

While some new school projects — like the grassy front lawn that carpets Fresno High's new plaza — use traditional landscaping, many schools like McLane are getting drought tolerant trees and shrubs.

Fixing sprinklers when they spring a leak also is a top priority, Temple said, noting members of the public can call the district's 24/7 hotline at (559) 457-3600 to report a problem. Replacing or retrofitting antiquated bathroom facilities also helps.

At the school board meeting last week, Fresno Unified trustees were quick to chime in with their own

ideas.

Trustee Cal Johnson said he would like to see more campuses use desert plants in place of grass. Creating a smartphone app for community members to snap photos of potential misuse could help catch leaky irrigation systems, Trustee Luis Chavez said.

Chavez said several of his constituents have called him with complaints, most recently about a broken sprinkler at Roosevelt High that was gushing water on a Friday afternoon. The constituent tried to report the problem to the district, but only speaks Spanish and had trouble relaying the concern.

"We really need to look at not just the (reporting) hotline, but really investing in more efficient watering systems throughout the district," Chavez said during an interview Thursday. "I don't think this drought is going to get any better anytime soon."

In Central and Clovis Unified school districts, officials are drawing landscaping plans with less grass and more alternative plants or drought-tolerant sod or turf.

For example, Clovis Unified will plant less grass and decorative flowers at a new elementary school planned for southeast Clovis, said Kelly Avants, spokeswoman for the school district.

Grounds crews have reduced mowing on existing grass fields to slow water evaporation, and newly installed low-flow sprinklers on some campuses will prevent waste and runoff, she added.

Clovis schools are committed to being good neighbors, she said, but noted that watering still is critical to keeping campus green spaces and fields safe for sports and other activities.

"We're not going to turn our play fields into concrete," she said.

### **City keeps a close watch**

Fresno Unified schools had 27 incident reports — but no fines — for water violations in 2013, the city's Standriff said. Back then, peak-season watering was limited to three times a week.

Beginning Aug. 1, Fresno rules got a lot tougher: lawn watering no more than twice a week and not at all in winter months.

School districts in the area are eligible and have taken advantage of an exception to the code for years, with many getting watering rights for up to six days each week.

Martin Querin, the city's water systems guru and the assistant director of public utilities, explained that schools can get a pass since their lots typically are much larger than a residential property. Schools usually divvy up their watering schedules, so only a few sprinkler heads turn on at a time.

Querin said that while he is not aware of any schools receiving fines in recent years, the city is willing to dock public agencies, noting he knows "for an absolute fact we have fined Caltrans."

Fixing — not fining — is the city's foremost concern, Querin said.

"Our main goal here is to work with our customers, whoever they might be. If we tell them to go out and fix it and we get called back, or they don't renovate for some other reason, then we will say, 'Oh, by the way, we told you about this, you've got a fine.' "

Querin said it's rare for a public agency to blatantly ignore the rules and lauded local school districts for being proactive about conservation.

"It's just requiring a change in culture in terms of how we see and perceive the management of water," he said. "It's going to affect everything from our public landscapes to our institutional landscaping at school as well as in and around our homes."

## **Back to school in the Valley**

### **FRESNO COUNTY**

**Today:** Clay Joint Unified, Fresno Unified, Kings Canyon Unified, Kingsburg Joint Union High, Orange Center, West Hills Community College

**Tuesday:** Parlier Unified, Washington Unified

**Wednesday:** Big Creek, Coalinga-Huron Unified, Kingsburg Elementary Charter, Monroe, Pine Ridge

**Thursday:** Fresno State, Selma Unified, Sanger Unified, Sierra Unified

### **KINGS COUNTY**

**Today:** Corcoran Unified

### **MADERA COUNTY**

**Today:** Alview-Dairyland, Bass Lake Joint Union, Chawanakee Unified, Chowchilla Elementary, Raymond Knowles Union Elementary, Yosemite Unified

**Thursday:** Chowchilla Union High, Golden Valley Unified

### **TULARE COUNTY**

**Today:** Cutler-Orosi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Pixley

**Wednesday:** Three Rivers

**Saturday:** Porterville College

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