

## Drought-conscious residents turn the water tables on public agencies

The scene captured on video by a onetime aspiring filmmaker had neither actors nor dialogue, but it spoke volumes:

A stream of water from a leaking sprinkler pooled on the ground, creating a miniature marsh. Above the glistening pond, silver block letters on the building in the backdrop spelled out: "Department of Water and Power, City of Los Angeles, Receiving Station K."

To Matt Chapman, who gave up his film dreams for a software engineer's more reliable paycheck, it was a case of hypocrisy worth documenting on YouTube. And he's not the only one scrutinizing how public agencies use water.

As officials crack down on homeowners who waste water, more drought-conscious Californians are using social media to broadcast video of what appear to be government agencies breaking their own water-use rules: sprinklers running at city parks in the middle of the day, public workers hosing grass until it becomes a muddy mess. They are also filing an increasing number of complaints about wasteful water use by their neighbors and on city property.

"Whether it's a violation or not is kind of a technicality. The point is they were very clearly wasting water," Chapman said of the leaking DWP sprinkler. "If they're trying to hold citizens responsible financially for wasting water on their homes, then certainly I hope somebody is being held responsible at the DWP for wasting water like that."

The state loses about 10% of its supplied water volume — billions of gallons a year — to leaking pipes alone, according to a 2009 study by Southern California Edison. A pipe rupture that flooded UCLA earlier this year resulted in the loss of more than 20 million gallons. A water main break in West Hollywood on Friday spewed as much as 9,600 gallons of water a minute.

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Officials say their agencies generally are using water more efficiently and cutting back on waste. But they acknowledge that sprinklers sometimes break, watering systems get reset and managing water use at massive public departments isn't always easy.

"Everybody has to follow the same rules," said Penny Falcon, the DWP's water conservation policy manager. "But there are special cases on some of those rules both with the state ordinance and with ours."

Public agencies have been more carefully monitoring water use since Gov. Jerry Brown proclaimed a drought emergency in January and the state water board adopted conservation regulations in July. This month, Brown signed legislation requiring agencies to quantify and report system water loss in future urban water management plans.

A spokesman for Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said he plans to issue an executive order within the next week that will impose even stricter limits on city departments' water use.

For many Californians who have been dutifully abiding by increasingly strict limitations on their home water use — even replacing much-loved grassy lawns with expensive drought-tolerant landscaping — the tighter rules for government agencies simply make sense.

Local water districts have tightened ordinances throughout the summer to reduce residential water use and to help achieve Brown's goal of reducing use by 20% statewide. DWP customers, for instance, may water only on certain days of the week and at certain times of the day.

Manny Fernandez, a 32-year-old project manager from Northridge, said he waters only on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays as prescribed. So when he drove past Ritchie Valens Park in Pacoima on a recent Saturday and saw sprinklers dousing an expanse of dirt in the middle of the afternoon, he was "so appalled" he pulled over to snap a [picture](#).

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"We're following directions; we're doing everything we can to help the state and avoid high bills," Fernandez said. "As a consumer, I just felt like it was a slap in the face."

The park has been closed for construction while workers install a water-saving irrigation system, said Ramon Barajas, an assistant general manager for the Department of Recreation and Parks. Air quality rules allow water use to dampen an area so that contractors don't create a dust bowl, he said. Officials are installing signs to let neighbors know that.

Since the 2006-07 fiscal year ended, the department has saved more than 2 billion gallons by using reclaimed water at parks and golf courses, replacing grass with synthetic fields and adopting other measures, Barajas said.

"We have gone the extra mile to comply with the ordinance without sprinkling in the daytime," said Tom Gibson, a department landscape architect. "There are certain instances we have to, and every once in a while there may be a broken valve or something. Sometimes the public does see that before we do."

In general, the city's 400-plus parks are supposed to abide by the DWP's standard watering schedule, Barajas said. The less water they use, the more taxpayer money can be reallocate elsewhere.

Current rules allow watering of sports fields outside of prescribed times if facility managers reduce their overall use by at least 20% and obtain a variance from the DWP.

Golf courses and other large landscapes can deviate from the department's schedule if managers cut water use by 20%, but they must also install weather-based irrigation controllers and use available recycled water.

Michelle Vargas, a DWP spokeswoman, said the agency does not track complaints specifically about government agencies. But because of increased consciousness about water conservation, she said, the agency has received many more complaints in recent months. In 2013, Vargas said, the department received 375 complaints. This year, it has already received more than 4,000.

A recent review by the agency found that its conservation efforts have reduced usage nearly 30% over five years. Since 2009, the DWP has replaced more than 2,818 fixtures at water and power facilities, which it says contributed to a saving of more than 120 million gallons of water over five years.

The Department of Recreation and Parks has received fewer than 20 formal waste complaints in the last month, Gibson said. Such complaints are filed with the DWP and passed to Gibson, who funnels them to the appropriate maintenance team. Even that small number of complaints represented a 30% spike from previous months, officials said.

Most of the complaints involved damaged equipment such as a leaking or broken sprinkler or broken valves, Gibson said. Sometimes vandals steal sprinkler heads, which can cause flooding.

If the DWP receives a complaint about a public agency, members of the Conservation Response Team determine whether there was a violation and then contact the agency in question, Falcon said. Like residential customers, agencies almost always want to fix the problem, she said.

In the case of the DWP's sprinkler leak, the department used YouTube's comments section to thank Chapman, and it pledged to fix it. Days later, Chapman returned to the building and saw that the department had kept its promise.

"I don't think we're going to fine ourselves," Falcon said. "That would be a lot of administrative paperwork for nothing."

[matt.stevens@latimes.com](mailto:matt.stevens@latimes.com)

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

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