

EPA sends California \$183 million for more water fixes

By Mark Grossi



U.S. EPA Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld during a press conference at the home of Bruce and Amy Roberts, at right, on the bluffs of the San Joaquin River. The Roberts have received acclaim for replacing their high water use yard with drought tolerant plants. MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

With the backdrop of a parched landscape near the San Joaquin River, a top U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official on Thursday pledged \$183 million to invest in drought-scarred California's water needs.

Cities in California will compete for the funding to build water-quality projects aimed at reducing pollution as well as improving municipal drinking water and wastewater facilities. Fresno and many smaller San Joaquin Valley cities have used such funding to install water meters, replace antiquated pipes and drill wells.

Also Thursday, Gov. Brown in Sacramento signed Assembly Bill 2636 to establish CalConserve, a revolving-loan program to finance water-efficiency projects for homeowners and businesses. The program also will help cities and counties reach their water-reduction goals.

For the EPA's announcement, regional administrator Jared Blumenfeld stood in the backyard of Bruce and Amy Roberts' Fresno bluff home overlooking the San Joaquin. The river runs through a brown countryside.

Blumenfeld noted the water-stingy xeriscaping in the Roberts' yard and complimented Fresno on the installation of 73,000-plus water meters over the last several years -- with the help of \$51 million in federal funding. Fresno and many other Central Valley cities had lagged behind the rest of the state in meter installation.

"Sacramento is still behind Fresno," Blumenfeld said.

The Valley's drinking water problems were in a spotlight last year when EPA publicly scolded the state for dragging its feet in spending hundreds of millions of federal dollars meant for drinking water fixes.

Residents in such rural towns as Seville in Tulare County and Kettleman City in Kings County had been forced to drink bottled water because they couldn't afford to clean up contaminated water from their taps.

The California Department of Public Health last year began to spend the money faster, and more projects have been completed. This year, the state shifted responsibilities for such funding to the State Water Resources Control Board.

"We've seen some real progress," Blumenfeld said.

Fresno has embraced water meters and cut back water use by 25%, said Tommy Esqueda, director of Fresno Department of Public Utilities.

Meters are equipped with a spinning red dial that alerts residents of a water leak, officials said. Stopping leaks is a major water conservation issue, they said.

Californians lose about 283 billion gallons of water to leaks every year, officials said. The energy cost to deliver water that leaks is about \$250 million.

At the Roberts' Fresno home, the xeriscaping makes all the difference in saving water, said Amy. And it cuts down on work, she said. After being out of town for the month of August, they came back to find only a few weeds.

"We hardly need to do yard work," she said.

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