

Some California water officials aren't following own call for conservation

By Lance Williams and Katharine Mieszkowski

RIVERSIDE — Mike Soubrouis is a prodigious water user, pumping more than 1 million gallons per year at his lushly landscaped Riverside home on a hot, windy Southern California hilltop.

Soubrouis also is a member of the Riverside City Council, which in July voted unanimously to impose tough new water conservation rules in this desert city of 317,000.

Yet as California's drought worsened from 2012 to 2013, Soubrouis consumed enough water to supply eight California households — more than any other top water official in the state, records show.

A review by The Center for Investigative Reporting shows that 26 California public officials used more than double the statewide average for household water in 2013 as the drought worsened.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin made the list of heavy users, although her rate is just about the same as the average for Central Valley public officials included in the CIR investigation.

And Fresno City Council Member Oliver Baines joined Soubrouis as one of three officials statewide who pumped more than 1 million gallons in 2013 — although Baines' usage apparently comes with an asterisk.

Soubrouis knows he should cut his water use to set a good example, he told CIR. But he has a 1-acre lot with cascades of flowering shrubs and a weeping willow tree, and summer temperatures hit 100 degrees. Conservation isn't that simple, he said.

"Do I have to sell my house to set that example, or do I have to just abolish all my shrubs?" Soubrouis said. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how I can reduce my water rate."

Like Soubrouis, many of the local officials urging the public to save water during California's crippling drought actually are profligate water users themselves, the CIR investigation found.

Water bills obtained via the state's Public Records Act show that in 2013, nearly half of the officials who supervise the state's biggest water agencies used more water than the typical California household.

And water officials tended not to cut back as the drought persisted. Even as their agencies scolded ratepayers on conservation, 60% of these officials used more water in 2013 than they had in 2012, records show.

As the drought has worsened, local agencies have kept up a steady public relations drumbeat, urging Californians to take shorter showers, limit car washing and even tear out their lawns in the name of conservation.

This summer, the state told local agencies to enforce tough new rules: Ratepayers can face \$500 fines for offenses such as permitting excess runoff from outdoor watering or cleaning sidewalks with hoses. Around the state, according to news reports, neighbors have begun reporting neighbors for wasting water.

When contacted, some water officials bemoaned how much they were spending on water and blamed undetected sprinkler leaks, overzealous gardeners or heavy use of the family swimming pool. All said conservation is important. All vowed to do better.

But not all are following their own water rules. Last month in Riverside, an NBC Los Angeles crew collaborating with CIR on this story witnessed sprinklers running seven nights in a row at Soubirous' home. Yet in July, Soubirous joined the council in forbidding watering more than four times a week. When asked about it, he acknowledged he might have unintentionally overwatered.

Trent Orr of the Earthjustice environmental law firm in San Francisco said the officials were "blatantly defying" the conservation ethos they impose on ordinary citizens.

"You should be leading by example," Orr said, "not telling the little people you regulate that they need to tighten their belts while you proceed as if nothing had happened and in fact use more water."

Water bills for most Californians are confidential. But bills for officials who set water rates and policies are public under the state's open records law. CIR obtained more than two years' worth for the elected and appointed officials who oversee 22 of the state's biggest water agencies — about 150 officials in all.

For comparison, a 2011 study commissioned by the state Department of Water Resources found that occupants of a single-family home in California use, on average, 361 gallons per day — or nearly 132,000 gallons a year.

North and south, Californians use about the same amount of water indoors, the study found. But Southern Californians use far more outdoors to keep their landscaping lush and swimming pools full. Overall, Northern California households use about 295 gallons per day, while Southern Californians use 523 gallons, according to the study.

CIR's analysis found a similar variance: Water-guzzling officials were concentrated in the drier, thirstier parts of the state — the Central Valley and hot inland areas in Southern California. Bay Area officials used far less: 255 gallons per day, slightly below the Northern California average.

In the Central Valley, where summers are scorching, water officials included in the CIR analysis averaged 855 gallons per day in 2013. The Central Valley's average use was less than 565 gallons. Because cities in the region have been slow to install residential water meters, bills weren't available for many officials.

The city of Fresno has installed 73,000 meters over the last several years. Residents are allowed to water lawns twice a week now and not at all in winter.

Baines' million-gallon leak

Baines said a horrendous malfunction in his sprinkler system made him a million-gallon user in 2013, the first year that water meters kept track in his west Fresno neighborhood.

Baines' first metered bill showed he used 4,000 gallons per day — about 11 times the state average. The city, which says it has the lowest water rates in California, charged him \$182.43 for that water.

One year and 1.24 million gallons later, Baines finally solved what he called a "freak situation" involving his sprinklers: In the middle of the night, water would stream from defective sprinkler heads, flooding the yard. The ground became so saturated that a sinkhole opened up behind his house, he said.

After repairs, Baines used 149 gallons per day in March. But the memory still rankles.

"Well, you know, I apologize," he said. "Clearly, I am not a model of water usage."

Swearingin averaged 850 gallons per day in 2013. She said faulty programming of her sprinkler system was the problem.

"I have many strengths, but programming my sprinkler system is not one of them," Swearingin said in a statement.

“Fortunately, before we went to Stage 2, the city of Fresno sent out a conservation representative to train me properly — just like they do, free of charge, for any other citizen — and my home is now incredibly average when it comes to water use.”

A Fresno city official said that the average household uses 960 gallons a day.

Riverside’s Soubirous not alone

Soubirous, the Riverside City Council member, was the only official to use 1 million gallons in successive years, but he was not the only mega-user in the Inland Empire city, which has outlawed watering between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Andrew Walcker of the city Board of Public Utilities used 1 million gallons in 2012. In September 2012, he pumped 6,000 gallons per day — enough water for 16 households.

Walcker’s 2-acre property once was a grapefruit grove. Starting 18 months ago, he said he began a landscape makeover, installing a state-of-the-art sprinkler system and pulling out 12,000 square feet of lawn.

Water bills show Walcker’s use dropped by 35% in 2013 and is on a pace to drop 50% this year. Nevertheless, in June, he used more than 1,500 gallons per day, triple the Southern California average.

The other big Riverside user was utilities board member Nick Ferguson. He used enough for six households in 2012 and slightly less in 2013.

Ferguson declined to be interviewed, but his bills may continue to decrease. In May, according to a news release, he won a \$10,000 Waterwise Landscape Makeover contest sponsored by the city and the Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce. His prize: a turf-free front yard.

Big water bills also prevailed on the board of the Coachella Valley Water District, which supplies desert resort cities and golf courses near Palm Springs.

Water board President John Powell Jr. used 1,800 gallons per day in 2013 at his home on an Indian Wells golf course, slightly more than in 2012.

In an interview, Powell blamed his landscaper for favoring a green lawn over water conservation. Recently, Powell said he took drastic action: He locked up his irrigation timer to prevent overwatering.

He said he also replaced lawns with rock and artificial turf. He expects big savings. But through Aug. 27, his water use was down 4% from 2013, records show.

Also struggling to conserve water is Randy Record, a Riverside County rancher and local water district official who was elected chairman of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California in May.

For years, the consortium of 26 Los Angeles-area water agencies has promoted water conservation. Now, facing cutbacks from Northern California, it has redoubled its efforts. In May, Record and other Metropolitan Water District officials held a news conference to warn that if voluntary conservation measures fall short, water rationing would begin.

At his ranch house on the outskirts of San Jacinto, Record has a history of letting the water flow: In both 2012 and 2013, he used enough water to supply four families, with a summertime spike.

But this year, in the name of conservation, he told CIR that he has dramatically cut back, turning off the sprinklers for a “big part of our lawn.”

The result: In August, Record’s water bill was half what it was a year ago. But he still used 1,300 gallons per day — more than twice the Southern California average.

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