

## Trees in Fresno's parks are suffering in the drought

By George  
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Rudy Bustos, city of Fresno Parks supervisor, looks over a water-stressed redwood at Roeding Park, on Friday, Oct. 10, 2014. JOHN WALKER — Fresno Bee Staff Photo |[Buy Photo](#)

Fresno City Hall is coming to the aid of the drought's latest victim — city parks' urban forest.

It's not too late, city officials say, but time's a-wastin'.

"We've got to do something," said Parks Manager Tony Hernandez. "You can replace a young tree. But you take a tree like this, or a tree like that — there's just no way you can replace them in our lifetime."

Hernandez was pointing to a couple of eucalyptus trees, each a good 70 feet tall and probably boasting a hundred years on Earth, near the Roeding Park tennis courts. Branches high above the parched grass are black — "dying back," Hernandez said, a sign of slow decay hard to reverse once started. And nowhere near the base of either tree is anything hinting at the existence of an effective irrigation system.

Not even nature's hardiest trees can long survive without water. Fresno's parks have too many showing such scars.

City Hall is pursuing a two-part campaign to change things.

First, secure a source of water that is reliable as well as safe.

This effort, long in the making, has picked up speed and urgency. City Hall is holding a series of forums on Fresno's

water needs. City officials see a future in which Fresno is known as California's "drought-resilient" city.

But building the necessary infrastructure to make this happen will take time and money. The public meetings are designed to help Fresno wrap their hearts and minds around the necessary commitment.

Second, City Hall is reorganizing its bureaucracy.

The City Council last month approved a resolution that transferred nearly \$800,000 and five irrigation specialists from the Public Works Department to the Parks Department. Public Works for the past three years had been in charge of parks irrigation. That mission went to Parks along with the money and the workers, effective Oct. 1.

This seemingly mundane piece of paperwork actually highlights the amazing turnaround in City Hall administration.

City officials in 2010-11 began to fully grasp the depth of Fresno's financial hole. Talk of bankruptcy seeped into off-the-record conversations.

One desperate decision followed another. Department heads who retired or resigned weren't replaced. Their duties were simply dumped on someone else in authority.

Patrick Wiemiller was director of both Public Works and Public Utilities. Bruce Rudd (then an assistant city manager) at various times took on parks and transportation. A promotion to city manager didn't lighten his burden.

Two other shoes dropped during this chaos. For reasons never made publicly clear, irrigation responsibilities were shifted from the Parks Department to Public Works. There was a certain logic to the move. Public Works is no slouch when it comes to caring for nature — its crews handle median island maintenance, for example. But the times' instability, especially in a Parks Department increasingly dependent on volunteers for some types of maintenance, was surely a factor.

Then the rains all but stopped.

Fresno at last caught a break in late 2013. The money picture brightened. When Wiemiller went to work at Lompoc City Hall, Rudd was able to promote Scott Mozier to take over Public Works and hire Thomas Esqueda to head Public Utilities. Manuel Mollinedo, a veteran in the public parks industry from Hawaii to Texas, came on board in the summer.

Mozier without parks irrigation remains one of City Hall's busiest executives. Mollinedo gets a leadership challenge that figures to make or break his legacy in Fresno.

"That's why Bruce hired me," Mollinedo said of saving the trees and improving the green space.

Mollinedo and his team are tackling the job step by step.

There is no precise inventory of Parks' trees — how many, what kind, which are healthy, which are "stressed," which are beyond help. Staff is doing the count now.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin and the City Council are starting to pump more general fund money into parks. Parks manager Hernandez said the irrigation crew expects to do a lot of repairs this winter. Part of the problem is the system's age. Part of the problem is the homeless who break things so they won't get wet at night while they're sleeping on park lawns.

Next comes a game plan. Fresno has 77 parks with three new ones in the planning. Mollinedo said the trees will be best served by a bubbler or drip irrigation system rather than sprinklers. Hernandez thinks advances in water technology might do wonders.

Finally, there is money. Budget hearings for the 2015-16 fiscal year are only eight months away. Mollinedo said he

knows city finances remain delicate. When the bean counters gather, he added, trees will have an advocate in him.

“You get a very different perspective about a place when there are a lot of trees in the neighborhood,” Mollinedo said. “If we can do this throughout Fresno, I think people will have a much more positive impression of the entire community.”

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