

California drought puts water thievery on rise

By Kurtis Alexander

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Photo: Rich Pedroncelli / Associated Press

Image 1 of 1

A dock sits high and dry at the end of a boat ramp at Folsom Lake, which has been hit hard by the California drought.

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This video player must be at least 300x170 pixels in order to operate.

As California's drought has grown more extreme this year, so have efforts to obtain water — some now veering toward the criminal.

Parched places like the East Bay hills have experienced not only an increase in water thefts in recent months, authorities say, but a bump in brazenness.

In San Ramon, for example, a construction crew hooked up hoses to a fire hydrant one day in September and began siphoning off water, even after being told not to, according to the [Dublin San Ramon Services District](#).

A district inspector found the crew tapping the hydrant and directed the workers to stop, officials said. The crew obliged, but when the inspector passed by an hour later, the workers had allegedly returned with their hoses.

[B.C. McCosker Construction](#) Inc. of Concord was hit with a \$2,084 fine.

From high-profile heists in Modesto, where six homeowners were fined \$1,500 for allegedly taking water from a canal, to the Sierra town of North San Juan, where authorities are trying to figure out who robbed a fire department tank, a drought-heightened demand for water has fueled something of a statewide market for stolen water.

"Somebody could be accessing it to sell to people," said [Jennifer Allen](#) of the Contra Costa Water District, where some of the thefts have occurred. "It could also be a resident whose well has gone dry ... or for construction."

Reports of water theft have increased so much in the district, Allen said, that officials are looking to raise penalties for stealing water from \$25 to \$250. A second offense would jump to \$500 under a proposal the district will consider next month.

"The hope is that an increased fine will serve as a further deterrent for those who are inclined to steal," Allen said.

A few miles south, a contractor recently got a permit from the East Bay Municipal Utility District to use water from a hydrant at a construction site. Instead, the contractor filled swimming pools, officials said. The permit was revoked.

In the Dublin San Ramon Services District, almost half a dozen contractors and businesses have been cited for stealing water over the past two months, officials said, including a street-sweeper and a well-driller as well as construction firms.

All hit up fire hydrants.

"It's not hard to do," said [Sue Stephenson](#), a spokeswoman for the district. "It's meant for fire safety, so you can't have padlocks and bolts to slow things down."

McCosker Construction, which received the district's biggest fine, was accused of illegally taking water and taking water without a meter — with officials lodging two counts of each violation because the crew was allegedly caught twice.

"It's like, come on, you were given the chance to do the right thing, and you didn't," Stephenson said. "So now it's going to cost you a lot of money."

The company did not return a phone call from The Chronicle.

The value of the water the firm allegedly took, officials said, was \$12.

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