

Water thefts on the rise in drought-stricken California

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(AP) — As California's drought drags on, officials are cracking down on thieves who wrench open fire hydrants and ignore or tamper with meters to access one of the state's precious commodities — water.

In some cases, wells dry up and scofflaws start stealing water from hydrants. In other cases, trucks in need of water for dust control and construction tap hydrants without using meters that charge them. Sometimes people just help themselves to water from natural resources.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District — like many Bay Area water districts— has never fined people who steal or attempt to steal water.

Instead, repeat offenders have had their water turned off and been charged reconnection fees, the Contra Costa Times reported.

But now, water district board member John Coleman says the district should have a penalty greater than the cost of water. On March 10, the board will consider options for criminal penalties for tampering with district equipment or neighbors' pipes.

Other places in the state also are grappling with water bandits:

— In the Silicon Valley, an open space district removed irrigation pipes that rangers say allowed a nudist colony to make unauthorized water diversions from a waterfall.

— In the Central Valley city of Modesto, a handful of homeowners were fined \$1,500 for allegedly taking water from a canal.

— In the Bay Area suburb of San Ramon, officials say a construction crew hooked up hoses to a fire hydrant and siphoned about 700 gallons of water last fall amid requests to stop.

— In the Sierra town of North San Juan, thieves hooked up their truck up to a valve on a fire department tank and stole hundreds of gallons of water.

California is entering the fourth year of drought, with 41 percent of the state in the sharpest category of water shortages, according to the U.S. government's Drought Monitor. So far this year, the state has received as little as one-fourth of normal snowpack, which much of California depends on for year-round water supplies.

California Association of Water Agencies spokeswoman Jennifer Persike said water theft is not a major concern in February but could increase in spring and summer when supplies are even more scarce.

"I think our public water agency members are being proactive," Persike said. "They're talking about it. It's all part of the overall action they're taking a look at."

In Fresno, a \$500 fine is possible the first time somebody is caught stealing water from a fire hydrant, city spokesman Mark Standriff said. After that, it can be a \$1,000 fine, he said, adding most theft typically is done by subcontractors

using hydrants without a permit.

California Water Service, which provides water for Bakersfield and other communities, doesn't issue fines, spokeswoman Shannon Dean said. Theft is rare, and when officials learn of somebody stealing water through illegal plumbing, the water company typically reports it to local code enforcement officials to handle, she said.

In response to water thefts from San Francisco Bay Area homes, the East Bay Municipal Utility District added locks to more than 1,100 water meters that were illegally pried open during the first 11 months of 2014 — an increase from 842 locked meters in all of 2013, district officials said.

"If people know you can be hit with a substantial fine, people are going to be more reluctant to steal water," East Bay Municipal Utility District Director Marguerite Young said.

It wouldn't be the first agency to increase fines. In December, the Contra Costa Water District boosted fines for stealing water from \$25 to \$250 for a first offense and \$500 thereafter.

Associated Press writers Scott Smith in Fresno and Ellen Knickmeyer in San Francisco contributed to this report.

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