

Drought 2015: Brave words won't be enough

By George Hostetter, Mark Grossi and Lewis Griswold

Let everything die. Rat on your neighbor. Pay through the nose.

Then wait until summer when Big Government gets *really* mean.

Welcome, central San Joaquin Valley residents, to new rules for surviving Drought 2015.

Local cities are hustling to figure out how they'll comply with Gov. Jerry Brown's recent executive order listing 31 drought-fighting mandates.

The spur is no secret. The fourth straight year of drought is the worst yet. All hope that the scorching months ahead will be anything but catastrophic to normal Valley life is crushed.

Not so the Valley's storied grit. Visalia officials say they'll get by. Clovis officials feel the same way. Both cities figure Sacramento has more surprises coming.

Then there's Fresno.

The region's biggest city just finished a two-year civil war over Mayor Ashley Swearingin's \$429 million plan to upgrade the water system. Rates would skyrocket but, hey, water security is worth it, right?

Then, right out of the chute, City Hall finds itself with nothing to give loyal water customers but threats.

"We're going to put more energy into the enforcement piece," Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda says of conservation efforts.

That's as cozy as Drought 2015 gets.

Here's a look at conservation plans in the three cities:

Fresno moving fast

Brown wants cities to cut consumption by 25%. That's the big mandate as far as city dwellers are concerned.

But wrestling that seemingly simple order to the ground is no easy task.

It's enough for now to note these points:

- Fresno began getting residential water meters about six years ago. Residential, commercial and industrial customers used nearly 55 billion gallons of water in 2008 — 310 gallons per person per day. The city used a bit under 42 billion gallons in 2014 — 222 gallons per person per day. That's about a 24% drop in overall annual consumption and a drop in per-person per-day consumption of about 28%.
- Brown is using 2013 as the starting point for his conservation mandate. Fresno's per-person per-day consumption in 2013 was 248 gallons. That means Fresno's consumption must drop to 186 gallons per person per day through next February to meet Brown's mandate.
- In essence, the average Fresnan over the next year must immediately consume 36 gallons per day less than she used in 2014 (222 to 186). This average Fresnan has never come close to such a dramatic change in behavior.

That's why City Hall is moving fast.

A public relations campaign is coming based on the social value of dead, dying and distressed landscaping. "Don't frown on brown" and "brown is the new green" are potential slogans.

City Hall computers record every drop of water flowing into every home and business. The single-family residence is target No. 1. City officials have a list of 26,000 homes showing every digital indication of extensive landscape watering on Thursdays — one of three days in the week on which such irrigation is prohibited. Those ratepayers can expect visits from the water cops.

Mondays and Fridays are the other two days. City Hall knows who's cheating on these days, as well.

City Hall often uses a unit of measurement called "hundred cubic feet," or HCF. One hundred cubic feet of water is about 748 gallons. Half of Fresno's single-family residences use more than 18.56 HCF per month, half use less. City officials know that the vast majority of the homes using more than 18.56 HCF per month are in north Fresno. Those homes are in City Hall's cross hairs.

The fine for breaking Fresno's water rules is \$45 per violation. Do it five times and you might lose your water service. Those fines most likely will zoom if consumption fails to fall fast enough and deep enough.

The city's water division is an enterprise department. In a nutshell, the customers' monthly checks pay for the cost of doing business, no more, no less. Most of that money comes from selling water. But what happens if Fresnans save too much water and revenues drop off the cliff? Past City Councils have chewed on the answer — a drought surcharge, forcing consumers to pay more for less. Council members whistling past the graveyard always agreed: No drought will ever be that bad.

Of course, rates are already going up. The council recently approved a series of annual rate hikes to pay for a huge reform of the water system. Swearingin said the improvements are the only way to secure a safe, reliable supply of water. Critics said Fresnans might wind up paying big bills for little or no water.

Then there is the egalitarian nature of Fresno society. Brown's 25% mandate applies to cities, not individuals. But city officials aren't keen on a Fresno in which Brown's target is met by the many conserving beyond the call of duty while the few enjoy rain forest-like yards. These officials want tips on freeloaders not caught by city computers.

"I don't know that we'd call it public shaming. other than that might be somebody we need to target," Esqueda says.

City Hall isn't ready to tackle all the drought and political ramifications of a city full of backyard swimming pools. City officials know if they don't, neighbors without pools will.

The big game changer almost certainly will come in July and August when, as usual, nature delivers something like three straight weeks of 105-degree temperatures. City officials know Jerry Brown didn't put his executive order pen out to pasture.

The Drought 2015 talk at City Hall always circles back to Fresno's new reality.

Dead or brown landscaping at home?

"You're making a contribution," Esqueda says.

Clovis waits for new rules

Clovis cut back on water production by nearly 10% last year without reducing landscape watering days. This year, the city continues a regime of three days a week, but officials are waiting to hear how new state water rules will be applied.

Clovis has planned for droughts, investing millions of dollars in its water banking program. The program can provide up to 7,800 acre-feet of water from an underground bank near Kerman. Each acre-foot supplies an average Valley family for more than a year.

Lisa Koehn, assistant public utilities director, said staff will bring up the water issue at a City Council meeting later this month.

“We think we will have enough water supply with our water banking facilities,” Koehn said. “But nobody knows yet what the state will be requiring.”

Last week, state authorities said they are requiring a 25% cutback throughout California. It’s a larger cutback than the 20% requested last year. And, for the first time in state history, the cutback is mandatory, not voluntary.

Some cities have been making conservation efforts longer than others, so their requirements may not be as dramatic, state leaders said.

The 25% reduction will be counted over three years beginning with the July 1 to June 30 water year of 2013-2014. An average of a little more than 8% reduction per year will make the grade.

Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board, the arbiter of water rights in California, said the state would be working out many details, such as prohibiting the use of potable water on traffic medians. The regulations should be worked out in the next month, she said.

Included in the proposals from Brown last week is an idea to replace 50 million square feet of lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping.

Koehn said, “We’re very interested in how this will play out.”

Visalia says cut is ‘doable’

Brown’s mandate is attainable in Visalia, officials said in the wake of the announcement.

“Twenty-five percent is doable,” Visalia Mayor Steve Nelsen said. “Sixty to 70% of homeowner water use goes to landscaping,” so there’s room to move even if it means brown lawns.

Even before the governor’s announcement, the Visalia City Council set a vote for Monday to impose stiffer fines on water wasters and tighten restrictions approved year ago, he said.

Fines would go up 25%. The first ticket would be \$125 instead of \$100, though first-timers could take a class instead of paying the fine. Second offenses would be \$250 instead of \$200, and third and subsequent offenses \$625 instead of \$500.

Other proposed restrictions include banning lawn watering in December, as is already the rule in Visalia for January and February. And golf courses would have to show documentation that they’ve cut back.

The public gets the message that there’s a drought, Nelsen said. Last year, total water use in Visalia dropped to 2001 levels, the city said.

“The citizens have taken it seriously,” Nelsen said. “We’re ahead of the game.”

But Nelsen faults the state for “being a day late and dollar short” in its response to the drought.

Ripping out lawns and replacing them with drought-tolerant landscaping is good, but “we need tax credits,” he said. “If it costs \$8,000 to tear out your lawn and put in drought landscaping, you should get an \$8,000 credit on your taxes.”

Visalia may join cities paying people to rip out their front lawns. It applied for state funding to give homeowners financial incentives to replace lawns and is waiting to hear if that will be forthcoming.

Brown's announcement also indicated the California Public Utilities Commission would be asked to require investor-owned companies, such as California Water Service that supplies water in Visalia and Selma, to reduce consumption.

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