

Fresno's water-saving challenge: Conserve 1.2 billion gallons in July

By George
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Sprinklers run on a grassy area in front of Eaton School in Fresno on a Tuesday last July. New requirements from the state will mean Fresno must cut water use by 28 percent this year. The cutback is due to the drought.

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The City Council on Thursday got a reminder of Fresno's No. 1 policy challenge for at least the next six months — the drought.

Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda gave council members a half-hour review of water-related options, possibilities and no-room-to-wiggle edicts born of four years of tepid rainfall.

Survival depends less on City Hall and more on diligence by Fresno's half-million residents, he said.

"We're really focusing on education," Esqueda said.

No one disputes water's central role to a complex city. No one disputes water's scarcity these days. Hence, Esqueda's fast-paced report with its wealth of detail almost overwhelmed the council.

Five points stood out:

- Fresno's consumption habits must adjust to state mandates, and Sacramento almost certainly has more orders up its sleeves. For now, Fresno must use 28% less water this year than in 2013.
- Fresno went to Stage 2 water restrictions last summer, which gave the city a big head start toward the goal. But more savings are needed. For example, to be on pace to meet the 28% mandate, the city should use nearly 1.2 billion fewer gallons in July compared to July 2014.
- City Hall is crunching mountains of computerized information delivered by water meters to identify customers apparently indifferent to landscape irrigation rules. For example, the computers found 2,857 accounts suspected of outdoor watering on March 5, 6 and 9 — Thursday, Friday and Monday, days when no one is supposed to be watering the lawn. (If another cause was at work, like a plumbing leak, the data would help the city determine that, too.)
- Esqueda is meeting with officials from Fresno, Clovis and Central school districts to get them on the water-saving bandwagon. He said all three districts want to do their part.
- City Hall is pushing hard to put more information in the hands of customers, especially those living in single-family residences where immediate savings are most likely. These efforts include enabling customers to access online data about daily use and water bills that explain how a customer's monthly consumption compares to Stage 3 restrictions should the crisis intensify.

Just about everyone on the council dais agreed that the green front lawn is doomed this summer. Georgeanne White, Mayor Ashley Swearingin's chief of staff, said the new motto is "Don't frown on brown."

Council Member Steve Brandau asked Esqueda to find a way to keep the city's trees alive.

Council Member Esmeralda Soria said the city should not discourage the planting of air-cleansing trees.

Council Members Lee Brand and Paul Caprioglio have long trumpeted the city's rebate program for water-saving household appliances. They asked Esqueda to accelerate the program's marketing efforts.

Any new water rules will require fine-tuning, Esqueda said.

"We'll be spending a lot of time with the community," he said.

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