

# Fresno's dilemma: Save water or pollute the air?

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Clean air or drinking water — the Fresno City Council must choose one.

Both, to the despair of Fresno's politicians, isn't an option.

The council on Thursday will consider an emergency water-conservation law that, among other things, would give City Hall authority to suspend its hydrant-meter program.

In a nutshell, city officials don't want companies using fire-hydrant water for dust control. Instead, they want companies to get their pollution-fighting water from the wastewater treatment plant, which has plenty of recycled water (for free) suitable for dust control but not drinking.

The only problem: The plant is about seven miles west of downtown and much farther from other parts of town.

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Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda explains his thinking with a hypothetical conversation with a typical Fresno ratepayer.

"Let's see," Esqueda says. "I'm not going to give you potable water to put on green, live vegetation. But I am going to give those guys potable water to put on dirt."

"It's tough for me to reconcile that. I think the equitable thing would be to find another source of water for the dirt. We don't want to create an undue burden. But this water issue is serious."

The hydrant-meter program is a small but important piece of Fresno's construction industry and its effort to curtail air pollution.

A company often stirs up the dirt when building (or demolishing) something. The company gets a modest-sized meter from City Hall that is attached to a fire hydrant. The company then fills a water tanker to take to the construction site. Or, if the site is close, it uses a hose connected to the meter. Either way, the company has water to spray on workplace dust.

The result: Less air pollution.

This is no big deal when normal rains come. The company takes the meter to City Hall once a month and pays at the same rate charged to everyone else. The water system can handle the bite because there's a healthy snowpack.

But California is in the fourth year of a drought of historic severity. Gov. Jerry Brown has ordered deep cuts in urban consumption of potable (drinking) water. To meet the state mandate, Fresno must reduce its consumption this year by 8.5 billion gallons.

City officials are already restricting Fresno's use of potable water for things such as landscape irrigation. These limits figure to get more severe as 110-degree afternoons approach. City Hall, with its "don't frown on brown" campaign, is trying to mold a new consciousness about potable-water consumption.

8.5 billion

The gallons of water Fresno must reduce under the state's drought goals.

8.5 million

The gallons of water Fresno hopes to save by having contractors use reclaimed water for dust control

Fire hydrants deliver potable water. The governor isn't joking. The San Joaquin Valley's air is hardly pristine.

A half-million Fresnans are stuck in the middle of this government muscle-flexing.

The hydrant-meter program delivers a lot of water. According to city records, companies used 64.1 million gallons in the nine months from July 2014 through March 2015. That's a daily average of 233,861 gallons.

The heaviest use was in the hottest months. Companies used 14.8 million gallons in July, 16.5 million in October. The biggest use in one month by one company was 2.12 million gallons.

The number of meters checked out varies month to month. The high was 222 in October. Every meter is not used every month. For example, only 89 of the 222 meters in October were used.

At 233,861 gallons per day, the hydrant-meter program in a year would use 85 million gallons. That's equal to 1% of 8.5 billion gallons Fresno must cut from its annual consumption this year.

City Hall is so intent on reaching this goal that it combs through piles of computer data just to catch someone on an obscure street watering his back lawn at the wrong hour. The prospect of saving 85 million gallons with nothing more than a council vote and the scratch of the mayoral pen is almost irresistible to the water cops.

The city's proposal is getting mixed reviews in the business world.

Jeff Roberts, vice president at Granville Homes, one of the region's biggest home-builders, says City Hall is on the right track.

"It's a good idea," Roberts says. "The drought is affecting everybody. We're all doing our best to cut back."

At the same time, Roberts says it's "ironic" that a government proposal designed to meet a government goal (water conservation) will lead to more driving, thus affecting another government goal (clean air).

Others use stronger language.

Sending water trucks to the sewer farm for dust-control water "doesn't make any sense," says Michael Prandini, president of the local Building Industry Association. "The only reason you put water on the dust is for air quality."

Richard Caglia, president of corporate development for Caglia Family Companies, says it's inevitable that his demolition company at some point will have a big job in a part of town 20 miles or more from the sewer farm. A single 4,000-gallon water truck probably wouldn't be enough to maintain work flow, he says.

"You'd have to shut down temporarily or buy another water truck," Caglia says.

City officials emphasize that they are asking the City Council only for the authority to suspend the hydrant-meter program.

Such action may become unnecessary.

Morgan Lambert, an official with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, says the district board recently told its staff to think of ways to protect the aquifer and the air without dinging a company's bottom line.

Lambert says it's too early to give details.

One obvious possibility: Temporarily loosen dust-control rules on projects in industrial areas, relatively far from schools, hospitals and high-density neighborhoods.

"The drought is creating a set of complicated scenarios," Lambert says. The district "is trying to balance all these competing factors."

The emergency water-conservation law headed to the City Council underscores the drought's severity.

The city already has a law designed to save water. For example, the proposed amendments would prohibit use of potable water to irrigate outdoor landscaping in a way that causes runoff onto things like sidewalks.

City Hall is getting more serious about enforcement. There was a time the city would send an employee to the house of someone suspected of watering the lawn on the wrong day. Public Utilities' Esqueda wants to make more use of digital data (every house now has a computerized water meter) to catch cheaters.

They're out there. City officials say the computers in March identified more than 2,800 accounts that appeared to be watering on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays, days when no one is to be irrigating. The city sent letters telling the customers to knock it off. By early this month, all but about 480 had gotten on the right watering schedule.

But in the meantime, more than a thousand other customers apparently lost their way and were suspected of breaking the rules in the same manner.

All this lands in the council's lap on Thursday.

Council Member Steve Brandau says he's not rushing to judgment on the hydrant-meter program.

"I see valid reasons on both sides," Brandau says.

Council Member Clint Olivier says City Hall should hear from the construction industry before acting.

Oliver Baines figures to be in the spotlight. He is council president and vice chairman of the Air Pollution Control District board.

"We've got to strike a balance," Baines says. "There is no perfect solution."

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