

Drought a boom for Valley businesses offering water savings

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California's historic drought has triggered a flood of business for Valley companies and entrepreneurs specializing in water-saving equipment, tools and technology.

As the state endures its fourth dry year, California residents are being encouraged by Gov. Jerry Brown to slash their water usage by 25%. In Fresno, watering your lawn has been reduced to two days a week, and even one day is preferred by city officials.

The dilemma over whether to let your lawn go brown has led to a surge in business for SYNLaw Central California. The Clovis-based company installs synthetic lawns for businesses and homes.

Melissa McQuown, an owner of the company, said year-to-date sales have increased 81%, compared to last year.

"We are booked all the way into the third week of September," McQuown said.

The effect of the drought may go away for some, but not for the average person. People realize how much water and money they can save and they are not going to go back.

David Malcolm, owner of High Sierra Showerheads in Coarsegold

To keep up with demand, the company had to hire an additional 4-man installation crew. They are doing 25 to 30 jobs a week, double the number of jobs they were doing five years ago.

The company has also rapidly outgrown its Clovis warehouse. A new, larger building is under construction.

"We have stacks of turf rolls in our parking lot because there just isn't any more room," McQuown said.

And it isn't just SYNLaw that is growing. The Fresno/Clovis area is home to at least five other companies selling artificial turf.

McQuown recalls how she first reacted 10 years ago when her brother told her the family was getting into the fake-lawn business.

"I thought it was a joke," she said. "We even started out working out of my parent's garage. But we took a leap of faith and look at how much business has grown now."

We started carrying lawn paint for people who don't want a brown lawn

Kevin Seubert, manager at Fresno Ag Hardware

Also taking a leap of faith was David Malcolm, owner of High Sierra Showerheads in Coarsegold. The small, family-run company got its start making low-flow irrigation sprinklers. Over time, the company branched out into water-saving showerheads. But sales remained soft, until media attention and the pain of the state's drought began to spread to homeowners.

Malcolm's showerheads, which retail for \$34.95, soon became a must-have. The slim-looking showerhead reduces water usage by 40% without sacrificing water pressure..

"After the governor announced the 25% water conservation plan, sales shot up," he said. "And it isn't just

homeowners who want them. Government is jumping on the bandwagon.”

Malcolm recently filled orders for 2,000 showerheads for four state correctional facilities. California State University, San Marcos ordered 250 shower heads.

Sales have more than doubled over the previous year and he hired three additional employees for a total of 7 workers.

Malcolm said that unlike previous droughts, he doesn't think people will go back to their old habits. He said there is a new-found awareness of water and how valuable it is.

“The effect of the drought may go away for some, but not for the average person,” he said. “People realize how much water and money they can save and they are not going to go back.”

Inside one of Fresno's oldest hardware stores, customers are searching for water-saving tricks and tools.

Kevin Seubert, manager at Fresno Ag Hardware, said the store has upped its inventory of lawn paint, landscape rocks, drought tolerant plants and rain barrels. And all are in demand.

“I was working the register recently and I had two customers come in within an hour looking for lawn paint,” he said.

As lawns are turning brown, Seubert made sure to stock up on pea gravel river pebbles and even white crushed rock.

Fresno Ag also sells a liquid you place in a pool to prevent evaporation. Do-it-yourselfers are also coming in for sprinkler and plumbing parts to fix leaky lawn sprinklers or toilets.

“People are really paying attention to what is going on,” Seubert said. “And they are doing what they can to cut their water use.”

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