

Fresno's extracted-water program has arrived

By George Hostetter
ghostetter@fresnobee.com

Grab a bunch of five-gallon plastic bottles, give the family pickup's suspension a once-over and make sure those back muscles are warmed up — Fresno, your free water is here.

The regional wastewater treatment plant's long-awaited recycled water program for commercial customers got going about a week ago.

Steve Hogg, Fresno's Public Utilities assistant director, at the wastewater treatment plant's extracted water fill station for residential customers that will open Wednesday, July 8. | George Hostetter ghostetter@fresnobee.com



The program for residential customers is slated to begin Wednesday.

Talk about simple. The water doesn't cost a cent and comes with hardly any restrictions. You must not drink the stuff, but it's safe for lawns, backyard gardens and washing the car. All you have to do is haul it away yourself.

"We hope this provides another source of water to help our residents meet their demand without using our precious potable water," wastewater treatment plant boss Steve Hogg says.

Adds Fresno Public Utilities Director Thomas Esqueda: "We've got high hopes for this."

Fill it up and go.

Wastewater treatment plant boss Steve Hogg on how the extracted water program works

The context has been building for some time.

For starters, there's the four-year drought, a dry spell in many respects as brutal as any ever seen in the state.

Gov. Jerry Brown and state regulators insist that cities dramatically reduce their consumption of potable (drinking) water. Fresno's target is a 28% cut compared to 2013.

Summer officially arrived last month, and with it comes the inevitable string of 100-degree afternoons.

Most folks in the Fresno metropolitan area grasp the crisis, but can't help viewing with broken hearts their drying green space.

Fresno officials saw this day coming years ago.

They pitched an upgrade of the city's water system that includes a new surface water treatment plant in southeast Fresno. The idea went through some tribulations, but the City Council finally approved the rate hikes needed to pay for everything.

At the same time, Hogg and his team sketched a multimillion-dollar system that would bring highly treated recycled water to nearly every corner of Fresno.

Water weighs about eight pounds per gallon. That means 300 gallons of water weighs more than a ton.

The problem is timing. The rains need to return in force for the full benefits of the system upgrade to translate into water security. Likewise, the recycled water network is a work still early in progress.

Yet, that overbearing sun keeps pounding us.

This is where Hogg's haul-it-yourself recycled-water program comes in.

To be precise, the stuff in question is actually extracted water. In Hogg's line of work, "extracted" and "recycled" mean two different types of treated wastewater.

But in a broader sense, it's all the reuse of a valuable resource.

The sewer farm about eight miles west of downtown has an aquifer that, over the decades, has built up quite a load. Hogg's idea: Build separate fill stations for commercial and residential customers on a secure back lot, devise a registration/education process for consumers, then relieve pressure on the aquifer by pumping (extracting) treated water and giving it away.

Fresnans in June used 3.85 billion gallons of water, down 30% from June 2013.

Here's the skinny:

- Commercial and residential customers [must fill out an application](#) and mail it to the treatment plant. A copy of your water bill should be attached. City officials will send you a key card that looks like a debit card.
- The card is needed to get through (coming and going) the fill-station gate on Jensen Avenue, about a mile west of the wastewater treatment plant, and to activate the fill station itself.
- The fill station is open 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Residential customers are limited to 300 gallons per day. Containers (at least one gallon in size) must have caps or seals.
- The commercial fill station delivers about 1,000 gallons per minute through a chute connected to a 12,000-gallon raised container.
- There are six faucets in the residential fill station. Be on your toes because the water flows at about 20 gallons per minute.
- The water is available only to people served by the sewer farm — Fresno, Clovis and county islands.
- Applying the water at home is your job. City Hall water cops won't hassle you — as long as it's Hogg's recycled water.

Conrad Braganza, the wastewater reclamation coordinator, says he's received a total of about 20 commercial or residential applications so far. He's expecting a lot more.

Hogg asks for the public's patience.

"We're still dealing with a few bugs," he says.

For example, Hogg expected commercial customers to come in with tanker trucks capable of holding 4,000 or 5,000 gallons. But the early trend is toward smaller trucks with one or two 500-gallon containers. Lining up the delivery chute and container opening has sometimes been a challenge.

But ironing out these last-minute wrinkles is the easy part, Hogg says. The big hurdle has been cleared.

Pointing to Fresno's first extracted water fill station, Hogg beams: "It exists!"

George Hostetter: [559-441-6272](tel:559-441-6272), [@GeorgeHostetter](https://www.instagram.com/GeorgeHostetter)