

When drought shaming doesn't work, let's talk about the wallet

By Mark Grossi
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The city of Fresno last week released the totals for outdoor watering on each of four June days. The grand total was more than 282 million gallons, but that's not the problem.

The problem is, these were four no-watering days.

I'll say it a different way. Up to 25,000 Fresno customers watered their landscape on four days when nobody should be watering landscape. You get the picture. Some folks aren't following the rules, and a sizable slug of water is being used.

The city's computerized water meter system allows officials to check accounts for excessive use on no-watering day. The surge in usage for landscape watering is pretty clear in the readings, officials say.

The system has revealed that news stories, public information campaigns and drought shaming have not worked on some customers. Those four bad days in June easily wiped out a lot of efforts to do things like capture warm-up water in their showers.

What about fines and increased water rates?

I have written about ways to conserve water, but I have not talked about money. Fines are a consequence whenever water rules are broken, but raising water rates? Higher rates are passed on to everyone, not just people who are violating the rules.

You know raising rates is politically charged if you've followed the controversy over the city's future water plans. I'm not reopening those arguments here. I'm trying to draw more people into the discussion.

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And I wanted to let you hear from David Grubbs, Fresno State professor emeritus of biology and associate dean emeritus of the College of Science and Mathematics. He has been emailing me and suggesting that raising rates would help.

Grubbs says he applauds people who are doing whatever they can to save water. He's capturing warm-up water in the shower, too.

After a little research, he learned how much money he would save by conserving one gallon of water — a little more than one-tenth of one cent.

Ten gallons of water savings equals a little more than a penny in your pocket. Grubbs has an interesting way of expressing it:

"I just spent \$35 for plumbing materials to route our shower warm-up water to an exterior tank. Even drilled a hole in the bathroom wall. We'll recover about 28 gallons a week and save less than 4 cents. I hope to live long enough to recoup my plumbing expenses.

“Clearly, we don’t do these things for the money. A tenth of a cent per gallon is ridiculously low. It should be much higher so people motivated solely by money might join in.”

282 million gallons of water were used on landscaping during four no-watering days in Fresno

Fresno must reduce water use by 28%, and the city is so far keeping up each month. But city officials say they would like to see bigger reductions in warmer months in case the city has trouble meeting the target in cooler months when outdoor watering generally slows down.

Clovis with a 36% target is not hitting the mark. Clovis already has begun including fines in customer bills.

What should Fresno do? City officials have told me there will be fines for customers who continue watering on prohibited days.

Those fines are some persuasive financial incentives in the short-term. And if we have another dry winter, expect to hear more about it next summer.

Meanwhile, the tender issue of raising water rates will attract continued debate, especially from folks who are already struggling financially and living on fixed incomes.

The community’s reaction to this discussion will shape Fresno’s water system for decades, and drought will revisit California. That’s a serious talk well worth your time.

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