

Wastewater treatment plant's free water is finally here

By George Hostetter
ghostetter@fresnobee.com

Fresno's free-water program is just about perfect. Now it needs customers.

The city on Wednesday opened its recycled-water fill station for residential customers. The commercial fill station opened last week.

The water is free, but you've got to live in the Fresno-Clovis metropolitan area to get it. The most important rules are 1) you must first get a customer identity card from the city, and 2) you must haul away the water yourself.

The stuff is actually called "extracted" water because it comes from the sewer farm's aquifer. But it's essentially recycled water, the liquid gold having been treated and allowed to percolate into the ground.

The water is safe for all types of landscape irrigation. Just don't drink it.

[The residential fill station's existence is no secret.](#) Steve Hogg, boss of the wastewater treatment plant, and his team have been working on getting things ready for weeks.

Nor is there much mystery about the goal. We're in a terrible four-year drought. Everyone is trying to save potable (drinking) water while keeping our city as green as possible. The sewer farm's aquifer has more water than it can handle. Unfortunately, Hogg's plans to build a system that distributes recycled water throughout the city is in its infancy.

The fill station is a stop-gap measure.

ID card in hand, I headed to the sewer farm on Jensen Avenue at about 1 p.m. to test the self-service operation. The station, located about a mile west of the treatment plant, opens at 7 a.m. and closes at 7 p.m.

I had 10 five-gallon plastic bottles and a 20-gallon plastic tub with lid in my pickup. Containers must be at least 1 gallon in size and sealable. I put my ID card next to a black pad at the gate. There was a click, then the gate opened.

A short drive on an unpaved (but improved) road took me to the residential fill station. There are six faucets with hoses. I put my card next to a black pad by a hose. The hose jumped a bit — water was ready to go.

It will take time, but I think the residential fill station will be a success.

A handle on the hose allows you to adjust the flow. The water comes in a hurry at full throttle, so be careful. The hose is a bit stiff, perhaps because everything is new. I struggled to stretch the hose to full length. I should have parked closer to the faucet.

Ten bottles and a tub filled in a hurry. I got flustered a couple of times as water reached the top of a bottle. I pushed the handle to full blast instead of off. Hogg says his team is still working out a few bugs in the system. Customers have some learning, as well.

It took me about an hour of travel and effort plus the better part of a gallon of gas to get 70 gallons of free water for my yard. From a cost-benefit point of view, was the money and work worth it? For me, yes. For others, maybe not.

That's the glory of America. People over time have an amazing way of making an idea work for them. It will take time, but I think the residential fill station will be a success.

A commercial customer came while I was at work. The driver filled a huge tank and was headed back to Jensen within minutes. Most likely I had witnessed 4,000 gallons of extracted water headed to dust control and 4,000 gallons of potable water saved for better use.

Conrad Braganza, who oversees the fill-station program, drove up in a city car while I was wrestling with the hose. He said I was the fourth residential customer.

The fifth soon arrived. Randy Ghilarducci of Fresno was doing things right. He had a powerful pickup (unlike my puny 30-year-old Toyota). He also had a 275-gallon container (300 gallons per day is the maximum for residential customers).

No fumbling with piles of 5-gallon jugs for this man.

Ghilarducci's container filled in a hurry. He said his garden would be the beneficiary.

I asked if he gave Hogg's fill station a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

Ghilarducci smiled and shot me a thumbs up.

"As long as it stays free," he said.

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