

In San Joaquin Valley, drought fight has landed in cities

By Mark Grossi and Marc Benjamin
mgrossi@fresnobee.com

The San Joaquin Valley now battles California's epic drought in cities as much as its nation-leading farm fields.

From Bakersfield to Modesto, people struggle to meet some of the highest state-ordered cutbacks anywhere in California. Some cities are coming up short of state-ordered goals – which could ultimately result in fines ranging from \$500 to \$10,000 a day.

Many local officials and residents say the goals – requiring as much as 36 percent cutbacks – are inherently unfair to hot inland cities where water use is higher in households, but especially on landscaping. Will the state back off the rules for inland cities if it becomes apparent that some just can't comply?

State authorities have no intention of easing the rules, says Max Gomberg, climate and conservation manager with the State Water Resources Board, which issued the water conservation targets. He says the state is not selling “rainbows and butterflies” in the middle of a drought emergency.

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Hanford City Manager Darrel Pyle

“We heard the unfairness claims being made in Southern California earlier this summer,” he says. “But it is hard to overstate the severity of this drought. We did not have time to develop a system of credits for water users. This is an acute emergency.”

Sanger in Fresno County, Visalia in Tulare County and Hanford in Kings County all have fallen short of their goals of a 28 percent cutback. Clovis and Kingsburg in Fresno County made their 36 percent cutbacks in July, officials say, but it has not been easy. Clovis, for instance, capped 39,000 city sprinklers.

Fresno, with a half-million population, is the biggest Valley city, and it has achieved its 28 percent goal so far with a vigorous public awareness campaign and water patrols to enforce outdoor watering restrictions, city officials say.

In many communities, however, people say they are victims of the timing and the rigid rules. Hanford, for instance, brought three subdivisions and a school into the city water system, increasing water use. The state wouldn't allow an exemption for those users, officials say.

City Manager Darrel Pyle says Hanford has always done its part to conserve water, but now must scramble to meet the goal. He said 60 trees are dead or dying in Hanford parks because the city has no choice.

“We are killing our urban forest,” he said. “I don't know how much more we can ask our community members to do.”

No good deed goes unpunished?

Clovis leaders have spent more than \$100 million on water system efficiency in the last several years, including several million dollars on water banking to insulate the city from drought.

“I think we've done a hell of a job in Clovis,” says longtime City Council Member Harry Armstrong. “We're water banking, we have a surface water treatment plant (to reduce groundwater overdraft), the water recycling facility and we've been involved in recharge for years. Yet we were penalized by having to cut back by 36 percent.”

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Public Utilities Director Luke Serpa says the city's population has grown 4 percent since 2013, which is the base year used to determine how much a city has cut back. He says it means the state-ordered water cutback is more like 40 percent for Clovis.

For individual customers, the 36 percent cutback is too rigid. They say their personal lives change and affect the water use. In-laws move in.

Or, the resident buys a home that wasn't even occupied in 2013, so there's no track record to compare water use now. Others installed pools since or changed to more water-saving landscaping just before 2013.

In some cases, the city will ask for a cut of 36 percent from whatever the average customer uses for the same month two years ago, or seek a cut of 36 percent from what the previous owner of the home had used, whichever is more beneficial to the customer, Serpa says.

Mary Cantrell, who's lived in Clovis for 13 years, moved to a new large-lot home last year and considers herself a victim of the state's 2013 rule.

At her new home last year, she and her husband installed a pool and invested \$30,000 in landscaping. In the June-July billing period of 2014, they used 75,000 gallons of water.

This year, they used 45,000 gallons, a reduction of 40 percent from 2014, but they were penalized \$25 under the city's rules because the state mandates that the city use 2013 water consumption as a guideline.

Cantrell said her house wasn't built in 2013. The city used the average water consumption for the two-month period in 2013, which was 36,000. The Cantrells use exceeded the city's 2013 average by 25 percent.

"I understand we're in a drought and that we need to reduce our use," she said. "We try, we did reduce by a considerable amount, but we still didn't come close."

The city barely made the state's 36 percent goal in July after narrowly missing it June. Officials know they must make the mark in the warm weather because water use dramatically drops off in cooler weather, and there will be less chance to save water. Landscape watering accounts for more than 60 percent of water use in many households.

At the same time, many Clovis residents in outlying areas have large lots and take their landscaping investments seriously. Anthony Ferreira and his wife, Heather, felt that way when they moved into a Harlan Ranch home on the northeastern edge of Clovis at the end of 2013.

I'm keeping my grass green because I have two little kids who play in the backyard.

Clovis resident Anthony Ferreira

After getting his first fine, Ferreira admits he isn't really trying to save other than sacrificing the grass in front of his home. He makes no apologies.

The front may look a little brown but the backyard "looks like Pebble Beach," he says.

"I'm keeping my grass green because I have two little kids who play in the backyard," he says.

Heather Ferreira, who stays home with the children, says she doesn't want to look at browning landscaping when

she's home. Lush green grass, colorful flowers and green trees dot the rear of the 11,000-square-foot lot.

She points out a sore spot in the water conservation approach. The Ferreriras must use less than they did in 2013. But they didn't live in the house most of 2013. The city figures the cutback based on average uses in 2013.

When the water bill measures her family's usage against a time when they didn't even live there, "it's a little confusing," she says.

Emergency rules

The state's water cutback rules seemed rushed because they were. State leaders say they had to move quickly as the drought deepened.

After 2014 finished as the warmest year on record and one of the driest, the Sierra Nevada snowpack was only 5 percent of average on April 1. That's a fraction of the lowest-ever recorded, which had been 25 percent of average, says state climatologist Michael Anderson in Sacramento.

Gov. Jerry Brown called for voluntary water conservation in 2014, and it fell far short of the 20 percent the state wanted. On April 1 this year, he ordered an unprecedented 25 percent cut from urban usage recorded in 2013.

"The state has never seen a snowpack that low or a back-to-back set of years like 2014 and 2015," he says.

Gov. Jerry Brown had called for voluntary water conservation in 2014, and it fell far short of the 20 percent the state wanted. On April 1 this year, he ordered an unprecedented 25 percent cut from urban usage recorded in 2013.

The state water board assigned urban cutback percentages for the largest cities, water districts and water companies, based on per capita water use between July and September 2014. It had the effect of rewarding those who cut back the most during that critical summer.

Missing these cutback targets could cost cities \$500 a day, says state board official Gomberg. If a city or water company deliberately defies the state's orders, it could result in a cease-and-desist order that carries penalties of up to \$10,000 a day, he says.

Gomberg adds that the state will be making suggestions and discussing strategies in the next several days with cities that missed their targets by more than 5 percent in June.

"But this is not about fines," he says. "It's about conserving water."

Tulare County: Some good, some not

The county's largest city, Visalia, didn't make the goal for June or July, but city leaders and water purveyor California Water Service are hopeful. Earlier this year, the city raised the prices for violations and is issuing just one warning before the first fine instead of two.

Kim Loeb, city natural resource conservation manager, says, "July is really when people were first getting their wake-up calls. We are hoping that is going to help those who weren't conserving as much."

California Water Service also is trying to generate conservation awareness, says spokesman Kevin McCusker. The company is running a contest that will reward 10 customers with a \$500 credit on their bills if they reach the 32 percent goal. The more often they exceed the state mandate, the more times they will be entered in the contest, he says.

The company also makes water system evaluations available for residents, as well as rebates and sprinkler head replacements.

41 percent

The amount Porterville residents cut back in July

Porterville is one of Tulare County's success stories. The city has been told to cut 32 percent from 2013 usage. In July, water consumption was 41 percent less than July 2013.

The city has issued only a few dozen fines even though several hundred warning notices were sent out.

Michael Knight, the city's water utilities superintendent, says the perils of neighboring East Porterville, which is not in the city, may have influenced Porterville residents to conserve.

East Porterville has become a poster child of the drought as wells have dried up and thousands are without indoor plumbing. The city's residents have been featured in major media outlets, including the Los Angeles Times and network television news.

Knight says, "I would like to attribute it to our wonderful educational efforts, but the reality has hit home with East Porterville drawing so much attention."

Mark Grossi: [559-441-6316](tel:559-441-6316), [@markgrossi](https://www.instagram.com/markgrossi)