

## Fines Over Water Use Rankle Californians

By Jim Carlton



Tim Adams got a \$25 penalty for not reducing water usage enough at his Clovis, Calif., barbershop. Photo: Jim Carlton/The Wall Street Journal

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CLOVIS, Calif.—Cities under pressure from California for failing to slash water consumption enough during the prolonged drought are cracking down on residents.

That's prompting an outcry in places such as this Fresno suburb, where officials handed out more than \$500,000 in fines this summer for violations including lawn watering. Tim Adams said he is unhappy about the \$25 fine he got last month for failing to reduce water usage enough at his barbershop, and he worries about future fines. "I legally have to wash my hands and utensils between customers," he said.

Some local officials share the frustrations but say they are being pressed by the state to reduce overall water use or face hefty fines themselves. Mandatory statewide water restrictions went into effect June 1, and Clovis was among the cities and districts ordered to reduce their water consumption the most, by 36% from 2013 levels.

"People are angry because they don't understand why," said City Councilman Bob Whalen, adding there is some resentment because Clovis has already taken conservation steps such as spending \$10 million on a water-banking

facility. “And I can’t give them a good reason except to say we’re in a drought.”

The State Water Resources Control Board released figures Oct. 1 showing that most Californians are complying with statewide restrictions aimed at cutting urban water use by 25% between June 2015 and February 2016 as compared with the same months two years earlier.

Board officials said they had to get tough as the drought continued—it is now entering its fifth year. “The bottom line is we are in an emergency,” said Max Gomberg, the board’s climate and conservation manager. “The goal is saving water, not giving credit.”



A sign urging people to conserve water was posted in the middle of brown lawn this summer in Kentfield, Calif., near San Francisco. Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

California’s urban water districts cut their consumption by 27% in August, exceeding the state’s mandate for the third straight month. About three-quarters of the 406 districts reporting data exceeded or were within a percentage point of their targets, ranging from 8% to 36%, but the rest failed to do so. For the first time, the board issued formal conservation orders against eight of the worst-performing districts, directing them to take immediate actions to rein in water use under threat of potential fines of \$10,000 a day per district. Board officials said their goal remains conservation, not punishment.

“I know it’s hard,” the board’s chairwoman, Felicia Marcus, said in a news briefing. The districts that aren’t complying “should look at what other folks are doing.”

But some of the districts call the cuts unfair and difficult to meet. One reason the Indian Wells Valley Water District was able to reduce use only 19.9% in August compared with its 36% target is that many of its 31,000 users in the Mojave Desert depend on water-consuming evaporative coolers, which humidify as they cool, said general manager

Don Zdeba. “I understand the state is under pressure to achieve the governor’s call for 25%, but the bottom line is for some of us it will be very difficult,” he said.

Still, his district and others are resorting to penalties after months of warnings to customers. Indian Wells in September issued its first two fines, of \$50 each. Statewide, dozens of cities and districts have issued thousands of penalties since the state’s mandatory restrictions went into effect June 1. San Clemente, for example, went from no fines and other penalties in June to 3,000 in August, while Castaic Lake went from nine to 169 over that period, according to board numbers.

Clovis, a city of 100,000 in the Central Valley, has been among the most prolific.

“The penalties are designed to get people’s attention,” said Luke Serpa, public utilities director for Clovis. It worked: The city has almost reached its goal of a 36% cutback, notching 32.5% in August. Under an ordinance passed by the city council earlier this year, customers can be fined \$25 for failing to cut their use 35% on a two-month billing cycle. Subsequent violations result in a \$50 fine.

Meeting those cutbacks has been easier for some. Many like Joe Podesta, 50, have simply let their lawns go brown. “It’s just grass,” said Mr. Podesta, a contractor. “We’re just trying to do our part.”

But Mr. Adams, the barber—who is among roughly a third of customers who have failed to make sufficient reductions—said it isn’t so easy for his store to cut use, with no lawn to stop watering. While he considers his fine unfair, he doesn’t plan to appeal it. “I would have to take time off from my business,” he said, “and that would cost me even more money.”

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