

# Editorial: California water hogs need more sunshine

By The Editorial Board

Californians dutifully have put buckets in showers, cut back on watering lawns, and replaced grass with pebbles and drought-tolerant plants.

Some of us, that is.

Rich people living in enclaves such as Bel Air don't seem to have gotten the message that we're all in this together. And we're not talking about people who take long showers.

The Center for Investigative Reporting, using the California Public Records Act, found that [365 residences in the Golden State](#) used more than 1 million gallons of water during the year ending in April.

One Bel Air home used 11.8 million gallons, nearly 1 million gallons a month and more than 32,300 gallons a day. [Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez did a little math](#) and found that using today's low-flow toilets, that would be enough to flush 20,000 times a day.

We don't know who this prince of Bel Air is. Nor do we know the identities of the other 364 water hogs. That's because of [an ill-considered 1997 bill](#) by then-Assembly Member Byron Sher, an otherwise-thoughtful Stanford law professor, who argued at the time that the measure was intended to protect celebrities' privacy.

[Silicon Valley moguls were among its supporters](#), but to generate support, Sher cited the sad case of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, who was fatally shot in 1989 by a stalker in West Hollywood.

Her death prompted lawmakers to take other steps to protect celebrities' privacy, including sealing driver's license records from the public. Sher's water-use privacy bill zipped through, 67-0 in the Assembly and 38-0 in the Senate.

The 1997 measure contains a clause that local agencies may disclose the identities of customers – residential and commercial – if they determine that the public interest in disclosure clearly outweighs the public interest in nondisclosure.

But water agencies in Sacramento, the Bay Area, Los Angeles and San Diego refused to provide the Center for Investigative Reporting with names of the water hogs. Sacramento city water officials declined to provide any data about water use, unless the nonprofit online news organization paid \$557 for programming. The center's reporters estimated that the unidentified Bel Air resident paid \$90,000 for the 11.8 million gallons. So the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has an interest in protecting the customer.

The exemption to the Public Records Act raises basic questions of fairness. Rich water hogs who live in gated enclaves are protected. But suburban homeowners could be identified if they happen to get cited and fined for overwatering.

Legislators should end this exemption. If there is a privacy issue – and we're not sure there is – water agencies could release the names of extravagant water users and redact addresses.

California is in a crisis. Farmers have fallowed fields. Wells in Central Valley towns have run dry. Reservoirs are frightfully low.

Privacy is an important right. But there should be no exemption to the Public Records Act because a person might be embarrassed. If attention shames extreme water wasters in curtailing use, the public would benefit.

The alternative is that the rest of us get the message that we aren't in this together, after all.