

Editorial: Give us more names of California water hogs

BY THE EDITORIAL
BOARD

In emergencies, most of us rise to the occasion. Unfortunately, some always need to be nudged.

So it makes sense that as California's drought has moved from mere dry spell to four-alarm crisis, good citizens would want assurance that all are conserving. Hats off to the East Bay Municipal Utility District, which unlike other agencies acceded last week to media requests for public records on water scofflaws.

Tou Moua, a water conservation representative for the city of Fresno, leaves a home where he left a notice for use of sprinklers during a prohibited time of day, flooding gutters and causing flooding to a neighbor's property in July 2014. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA Fresno Bee file

Drought shaming may feel petty, but the rich in this state can too easily ignore the financial penalties that motivate the rest. The top East Bay water wasters are generally who you'd expect.

Venture capitalists, real estate developers, the former vice chairman of Chevron and – say it ain't so – the supposedly penny-wise Oakland A's executive Billy Beane are major guzzlers. And all can afford to shrug off "excessive use" bills while average Californians let their toilet water go yellow and lawns go brown.

Several blamed irrigation leaks, and it's true that few homeowners have time to monitor their water use in granular detail. But bad publicity did seem to get wasters' attention in a way that high utility bills didn't.

"We are more than displeased and embarrassed by the usage and are taking immediate action," Beane said in a statement after a preliminary list of excessive water users indicated that his lush Danville estate was hogging nearly 6,000 gallons of water a day, or about 24 times the daily use of the average household in the district.

Message sent, message received.

Sacramento's water agency, citing privacy, only names the top 10 users, who are all industrial – and not those who repeatedly water on the wrong day, flood gutters or otherwise flout the rules.

When the Center for Investigative Reporting looked at extreme water users statewide, the city of Sacramento refused to release any data unless CIR paid it \$557 for programming. Modesto officials stonewalled, too.

When CIR did find that some unnamed homeowner in Bel Air has been sucking up nearly 1 million gallons a month, the news prompted an unofficial neighborhood posse to launch its own investigation, with plans to unmask the "Wet Prince." Clearly, what's available to the public isn't enough.

We get the reluctance to invade privacy and embarrass people. But public sacrifice only works if everyone does it.

State law allows local agencies to disclose water wasters' names if it's in the public interest. All of California's cities should be transparent about who is ignoring water restrictions.

Our interest in ensuring that the burden of this statewide emergency isn't borne just by the lower and middle classes is obvious.



