

Bill McEwen: Planning next summer's water budget

By Bill
McEwen

The drought has driven a sliver of discontent into a happy home.

My wife likes the grass to be green. But she also knows that we need to play by the rules. So we faithfully obeyed Fresno's twice-a-week water restriction. The timers were set all summer to Wednesdays and Sundays, and we limited our watering to 10 minutes.

Fresno Bee editorial page editor Bill McEwen. Eric Paul Zamora The Fresno Bee

You can guess what happened.

The grass in front gave way to large patches of dirt. The backyard grass virtually disappeared.

"We're going to lose the grass, anyway," I said in July. "Let's stop watering the grass and focus more of the water on the trees in back."

Don't bother guessing who won that argument.

Two fruit trees perished in the heat of summer; others are showing signs of stress. With November's arrival, we are limited to watering on Sundays.

What's more, our utility bill says we are using a bit more water than Fresno's "average household."

At the bottom of last month's bill was this warning: "If required by drought conditions, your Stage 3 Water Allocation will be 13,593 gallons. You are currently 7,740 gallons *above* your Stage 3 Water Allocation. Please help to conserve this precious resource."

Actually, I thought we were conserving this precious resource.

Two folks from the city had come out in early summer and conducted a water audit. They were pleasant and didn't scold us. They found a leaky sprinkler pipe and a couple of malfunctioning sprinkler heads, and they suggested that we reposition some sprinklers so that they sprayed more on the landscape and less on the back patio.

My brother-in-law came over and did the repairs. You should also know that we follow many of the drought "rules." We have low-flow toilets, wash full loads of clothes and dishes, take shorter showers than we used to, and let yellow mellow.

It really is about choices and budgeting because water – like money – doesn't grow on trees.

However, our three-bedroom home is on a 0.37-acre lot. It's a lot that people who preach "sustainability" hate with a passion. In their eyes, it's much too big for just two people.

The flip side is, we have a lot of trees. According to the nonprofit TreePeople, trees clean the air, combat climate change, cool streets, cut energy bills (if situated close to a house) and save water by shading thirsty lawns. Moreover, they provide cover for birds. In fact, I like to think of our backyard as something of a bird sanctuary.



So I am hoping that El Niño spares us from Stage 3, our reservoirs and aquifers start getting refilled, and the California economy – primarily ag – recovers the \$4.9 billion and the 35,000 jobs lost to the drought in 2014 and 2015.

Last week's rain was appreciated. The dirt where the grass used to be turned to mud, which is nicer to look at than dry, dusty dirt.

But regardless of whether El Niño is a boom or a bust, we have to think about water differently.

I'll start with what I'm going to suggest to my wife: We need to treat water like we do most everything else. That's right, we need to budget our water.

If it's green grass you want, then something else has to give.

When guests visit for a week, we can limit them to three showers during the stay and tell them to go potty at the gas station around the corner. That will get the relatives talking.

Showers have to get shorter – again. Our low-flow toilets have to be yanked and replaced with even more water-efficient models. Maybe we'll replace our landscape with drought-tolerant plants. Or rip out the plant bubblers and install drip. And a green lawn might mean a smaller lawn. A much smaller lawn.

Then there's this: When guests visit for a week, we can limit them to three showers during the stay and tell them to go potty at the gas station around the corner.

That will get the relatives talking.

I could chop down a few fruit trees so that the last two or three thrive. Or I could start filling up garbage cans with free recycled water from the city's plant on Jensen Avenue just like my retired colleague George Hostetter and others are doing.

Some things I am not willing to do.

Rocks reflect too much heat to be a substitute for grass. Another brother-in-law went that route. Ripped out the whole front lawn and did the native-plant desert thing. It is beautiful. But you lose 5 pounds walking from the sidewalk to the front door on a July day.

Synthetic grass is too hot for Fresno, too.

Don't even mention that paint-your-lawn-green thing. They did that at a house a couple of streets south of mine and the result was a shade of green best described as "psychedelic." Now that lawn is fading to a version of Crayola's magic mint.

But to each his own.

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