

Drought in cities: Will people get tired of water-saving demands?

By Barbara Anderson
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Dead lawns. Buckets in showers. Low-flow toilets.

In 2015, people in cities from Merced to Tulare made changes inside and outside their homes, some grudgingly to avoid a water penalty and some willingly out of a sense of civic duty.



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After four dry winters, Fresno and California's San Joaquin Valley could see above-average rain and snowfall this winter from an El Niño ocean pattern in the eastern Pacific Ocean. But while chances for a wet winter are increased, meteorologists stress that there's no guarantee; it will take more than one good year to make up for the effects of the region's severe drought. Tim Sheehan tsheehan@fresnobee.com

SPECIAL REPORT: FROM DROUGHT TO EL NIÑO

For Fresnans such as Arlyn Presley, saving every drop matters. The retired teacher began collecting cold water in her shower this summer, and the bucket is still there this fall. It's a small effort, she said, but water is too valuable to waste even a gallon.

"I just figure water's like gold, like oil."

Others – lots of others – have saved precious gallons, too.

Jim Pardini, a Fresno restaurateur, estimates his workers wash thousands of pieces of china, glassware and silverware a day. He can't abide unattended running faucets and half-empty dishwasher loads.

"I'm like the water police around here," he said.

The question facing cities is whether people will continue to make sacrifices and change habits to conserve water through this winter and beyond. Water conservation has to become the norm for California and the Valley, say environmental experts. Droughts are forecast to be more common than rare in coming years.

Drought is the new normal, said Mark Lubell, a University of California, Davis, professor of environmental science and policy.

“We know drought is coming, even if it rains three years in a row,” he said.

Gov. Jerry Brown has said Californians must not ease up on conservation, and a [25 percent water reduction mandate](#) imposed this year, will remain in effect through February.

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Arlyn Presley of Fresno

Across the Valley during the blistering hot months of June through October, people conserved water. Cities reduced consumption between 12 percent and 40 percent from their 2013 water use to meet the governor’s statewide order to cut consumption.

Brown lawns popped up throughout the Valley. Trees and shrubs died. In Clovis, the city’s beloved Christmas tree, a coast redwood, fell victim to the drought.

But despite the sacrifices, cities found it difficult to meet conservation mandates. Some Valley towns, such as Clovis, had to cut water use by 36 percent to comply. Cities imposed penalties for watering on wrong days and wrong times; and Clovis also fined people for overwatering (penalties in four months totaled more than \$763,000).

Only five Valley cities – Dinuba, Kingsburg, Madera, Merced and Selma – met their water-reduction goals.

Reaching water conservation mandates in the winter, when consumption normally dips, will be even harder than it was in summer, city officials know.

California needs people to buy in to water conservation over the long haul, but the weather could throw a monkey wrench into conservation. Meteorologists forecast a wet [El Niño](#) winter, a welcome respite from the past four parched years, but rainstorms won’t be enough to replenish the water supply, they say. Storms could, however, be sufficient to lull people into complacency about water consumption.

Lubell, co-director of the [Center for Environmental Policy and Behavior at UC Davis](#), has been watching conservation efforts. He’s more than slightly surprised by the successful conservation efforts, but it takes longer than one drought to transform a culture of water wasters into water savers. He said he suspects water conservation could be short-lived.

“If it rains a lot, people will not feel as pressured to reduce their water bill,” he said.

A new mindset

Fresno Realtor Jason Farris has seen a huge shift in the attitudes of home buyers that he doubts an El Niño will shake.

The drought has made it harder to sell homes with private wells that are on the outskirts of cities. Images of dried wells and people lugging bottled water into homes in places like East Porterville have not gone unnoticed by the home-buying public.

“We have a lot of buyers who will not consider properties unless they are hooked up to city services,” Farris said.

Plush, green backyards also are not a big selling point these days.

“We’re getting push-back from our buyers that they only want to buy homes from responsible people,” he said.

Buyers of newly built homes will have little choice but to accept less turf. The California Water Commission in July adopted water limits that eliminate grass from new office and commercial buildings, and reduce the amount used at new homes from one-third of the landscaped area to 25 percent.

Larry LeMay, vice president of operations at [A-G Sod Farms](#), which has four farms in California including one in Fresno, has cut turf inventory by 50 percent and has laid off more than 100 workers. In October, three competitors in the state closed their doors, he said.

New homeowners who want a natural grass lawn are not planting fescue, a cool-season grass that has been a staple in the Valley. Instead, there has been a shift to drought-tolerant Bermuda grasses, he says. Two years ago, fescue was 70 percent to 80 percent of his Fresno sod sales; today, Bermuda grass is 80 percent.

People are willing to let their lawns go brown.

Cory Severson, Coarsegold landscaper

To adapt, his company also now supplies mulch and soil in a pod, a one-yard bag for flower beds to help retain moisture around plants, LeMay said.

Coarsegold landscaper Cory Severson sees the effects of water conservation every day on his job at [Advanced Droughtscapes](#).

“People are willing to let their lawns go brown,” Severson said.

They’re also looking for alternatives to replace dead grass. Most are looking at the cheapest substitute, such as redwood bark chips, but some are making investments in new drought-tolerant yards.

“They want a landscape that is going to be there forever,” Severson said.

Jon Grace of Clovis let the grass in his front and back yards die.

“I’m just trying to be responsible,” he said recently while getting a haircut at the Clovis Barber Shop. (Barber Tim Adams listened with some amusement: Adams got a \$25 penalty for missing his target water use at his storefront business this summer. The charge was ruled invalid when the city realized he had used less water than the city’s allowable usage.)

Grace said he never got a penalty, and replacing both lawns with drought-tolerant landscaping and drip irrigation guarantees he won’t.

He hired Severson to design his landscaping. A dry creek bed of rocks runs through the front yard. Plants, including drought-tolerant red roses, have survived on five minutes of watering once a week.

The landscaping wasn’t cheap, but Grace, 70, said: “If you’re going to do it, you have to pay to do it right.”

He took advantage of a [state rebate](#) that paid \$2,000 of the \$9,000 the landscaping cost. The remainder was financed with a [HERO Program](#) loan that allows him to make monthly payments and get a tax write-off. Plus, he noted, he no longer has to pay a gardener to mow the lawns.

Cities are encouraging people to take advantage of water-conservation rebates, but as of Nov. 17 only 150 in Fresno applied for the city’s lawn landscaping program, said Nora Laikam, water conservation supervisor.

Laikam isn’t sure why the rebate hasn’t caught on with homeowners.

“We had hoped that people right away would change out their lawns,” she said.

Those who have replaced grass for water-efficient plants are happy with the nearly maintenance-free yards, she said.

“They say, ‘Wow, if I’d known this before I would have done this a long time ago,’ ” Laikam chuckled, “that’s coming

from the men, by the way.”

A changing landscape

People with brown, dead lawns and those who have drought-tolerant yards are turning to city parks for places to toss a ball or have a picnic.

Grace lives within about a block of a park, and he considered that when he tore out his lawns. He has a granddaughter, 5, and a grandson who is a teenager.

“There’s stuff there to play on,” he said.

Municipal parks, however, are changing. Cities are moving away from large turf areas, wherever possible.

“I envision new parks are going to have less sodded areas,” said Manuel Mollinedo, director in charge of Fresno parks. “There will be more shrub beds, areas devoted to more of a visual impact than anything else.”

Cities also are turning to recycled water to irrigate lawns, trees and plants.

Fresno has plans to convert Roeding Park to reclaimed water. Clovis uses recycled water at Pasa Tiempo, a park built five years ago in the southeast section of the city. The Clovis Unified School District has incorporated drought-tolerant landscaping into plans for Virginia Boris Elementary School that should open next year. The district also is developing a 10-year plan to reduce consumption that includes increasing the use of recycled water from the city.

The drought has been destructive to city landscapes. Clovis lost a lot of trees this summer to watering restrictions – 110 to 115 at last count, said Eric Aller, parks manager.

“Typically, we lose half a dozen to a dozen during a hot summer,” he said.

110 to 115

Number of trees in Clovis that have died from the drought

Most of the dead trees were water-thirsty coastal redwoods. They will be replaced with drought-friendly Valley oak, Chinese pistache and red oak, among others, Aller said.

Changes that cities are making in response to the drought are designed to be long-lasting, but what’s less clear is if people are making adjustments in their water use that they will continue for years.

Lubell isn’t certain that people who have been taking shorter showers or flushing toilets less often to conserve water won’t revert to previous ways.

And fines for using too much water are not enough motivation, he said.

Peer pressure could be more effective than penalties, said Michelle L. Lute, a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. While at Indiana University, Lute and two other researchers looked at what determines whether people choose to “flush or not flush” after urination. Toilets account for about 27 percent of indoor household water use. The researchers’ results were published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology.

The researchers found four reasons for hesitancy to not flush: disgust sensitivity, habitual nature of flushing, cleanliness norms and lack of pro-environmental motivation.

But the result of the research “suggests social norms are one of the most important drivers of water use,” Lute said.

She’s not a fan, however, of water shaming. Sites have popped up on the Internet where people can tattle on water-

guzzling neighbors. People are more likely to respond to positive reinforcement than negative, Lute said, and change happens when people feel it's something that is accessible and within their ability to do.

Grace said reaction to his xeriscape front yard has been positive, and several neighbors, including one next door, have since re-landscaped their yards.

Green lawns still dominate the Clovis neighborhood.

But Realtor Farris said there's no turning back: People are taking out grass in backyards and putting in gardens with drip irrigation. They're raising chickens where swing sets used to sit.

The drought "is changing how people live," he said. "The landscape has changed for years to come."

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