

Santa Cruz plans water use restrictions

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SANTA CRUZ -- Residents of Santa Cruz, Live Oak and beyond will likely have to reschedule their gardeners and reprogram their sprinklers soon as water officials plan to restrict the times and days customers can water their lawns and flowers.

The Santa Cruz Water Department is drafting a plan that would force the 90,000 county residents served by the agency to limit irrigation starting May 1 to two assigned days each week, and only before 10 a.m. and after 5 p.m. Specific days are expected to be assigned next week.

The proposed measures go further than conservation rules enforced in 2007, when residents were asked to water only in the early morning or at night. In light of a three-year drought, department officials say the strictest conservation measures since 1990 -- when water was rationed -- are needed to reduce outdoor water use by a third to ensure there is enough water to meet customer needs.

"It's going to affect people," said Toby Goddard, department conservation manager. "People who have automatic irrigation systems, they may need to reprogram their system. People need to reschedule gardeners and landscapers."

Commercial customers also will be restricted in days and times they can water. Those details have yet to be released.

In addition, Goddard said, residents with automatic irrigation systems will be limited to 15 minutes of watering per area per session. No one will be allowed to wash outdoor pavement, driveways or walkways with city water.

All residential customers will have one weekend day on which to water, Goddard said.

Department workers plan to patrol the neighborhoods and keep an eye out when they are on duty to make sure customers are complying, said department Director Bill Kocher. First-time offenders will receive a notice of violation giving them a chance to change their ways. Fines will be levied for multiple violations; the fines have yet to be set.

Kocher said he also expects neighbors will be policing each other, as has been the case in past years: "We don't ask people to do that but that's what happens. You'd better get along with your neighbor because if you don't ... be darn sure they're going to rat you out. That's what happened last time."

The restrictions are set to go before the Santa Cruz City Council next month. If approved, they will apply to all customers. The district includes Santa Cruz, Live Oak, Santa Cruz

Gardens, Pasatiempo and parts of Capitola, including the Capitola Mall and other developments on 41st Avenue.

The proposal comes as Santa Cruz County endures its third straight dry year. While recent rains have helped fill the city's Loch Lomond Reservoir, water flow in the San Lorenzo River, from which the city draws much of its water, is at 60 percent of normal, Kocher said.

In addition, Kocher said, the agency must prepare for next summer in case 2010 is dry, too.

Santa Cruz is the first water department in the county to announce conservation measures, but will likely not be the last. San Lorenzo Valley Water District, Scotts Valley Water District and Soquel Creek Water District all have said they are planning to ask residents to conserve. Conservation details from those districts have yet to be announced.

Kocher said he wants to get the word out now so customers do "not go crazy this year with planting perennials and annuals. Let's recognize we're probably not going to make it through the summer with a real green lawn."

At The Garden Co. Nursery and Gift Shop in Santa Cruz, owner Charlie Keutmann said he will hold a workshop with Goddard on June 6 to teach residents about drip irrigation, which minimizes water use by employing pipes, tubes and other equipment to drip water slowly onto plants' roots.

Already, Keutmann said, many of his customers are using drought-tolerant native plants or those from South Africa or Australia, which require little watering once established.

"We're not just telling people save water, save water, save water," Keutmann said. "I think it's important to enable people, to give them tools they can work with."

The conservation proposal will go before the city's Water Commission at 7 p.m. April 6 in the City Council chamber, 809 Center St., Santa Cruz. The council will consider the restrictions at its regular meeting April 26. For information visit www.ci.santa-cruz.ca.us.