

Star-Telegram

In D-FW, targeting water wasters is often not a priority

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The award-winning theme of the local water conservation campaign says it all:

"Save Water. Nothing can replace it."

Many Tarrant County residents have heeded the call, contributing to a 14 percent reduction in water consumption from 2002 to 2009.

Even as this month's rains brought flooding to parts of North Texas and refilled lakes, a water shortage looms in the long term without new sources and more conservation. Local officials are looking as far away as East Texas and Oklahoma for new sources, a process that could take years and cost billions.

If the area hopes to have enough water for the coming decades, though, conservation is key. A state-mandated goal for North Texas is for 23 percent of future water needs to come from conservation and reuse.

Yet many cities seem to give only lip service to targeting water wasters or discouraging those who may use more water in a day than many households use in a month.

On the hottest days, you can still spot sprinkler systems pouring on water at midafternoon, a violation of local ordinances prohibiting watering between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. But the fines are almost nonexistent.

Fort Worth has never issued a citation. Neither has Hurst or North Richland Hills. Mansfield assessed a fee on more than a dozen water bills three years ago but has barely bothered in the last two years.

Cities might also persuade people to conserve by raising rates for those who use more water. While some cities have tiered rates, others are loath to embrace them. Colleyville considered the change, for example, but decided this summer to stick with a flat rate.

Some cities don't even know who their biggest users are. Westover Hills, an exclusive enclave on Fort Worth's west side with one of the state's highest per capita usage rates, can't tell you its top users.

Blame that on a state law. To encourage conservation, recent state regulations require more careful tracking of water usage. But another state law actually blocks the flow of information by allowing residential users to shield their figures from public scrutiny.

There is also simply not enough information about water usage to determine who is being wasteful or efficient.

"I cannot tell you if [a city's] residents are doing a good job, if industry is doing a good job, if restaurants are doing a good job, how much water is being used by fire hydrants," said Jim Parks, a member of the state's water conservation advisory council and chairman of the Region C Regional Planning Group, which is charged with developing a long-term plan for the 16-county Dallas-Fort Worth region.

"It has been identified as a problem, and we are working toward getting that information, but there are impediments."

Encouraging conservation is the only way to meet the state's goals, said Lacey McCormick of the National Wildlife Federation.

"There is every reason to think that conservation could work for North Texas, but it is more difficult to make the case without all the facts at our disposal," McCormick said.

Scattershot data

Determining who uses how much water -- and if it is being wasted -- can feel like swimming against a strong current.

The *Star-Telegram* requested information on residential and commercial water use in 2009 from seven cities in the area: Fort Worth, Arlington, Mansfield, Southlake, Colleyville, Westlake and Westover Hills.

At times the information was simply not available because city officials didn't have it. Colleyville, for example, says its billing software is incapable of separating residential and commercial users.

In a number of cities, determining the top customers' water usage is difficult because of the provision in the state's utility code allowing individuals to keep the data private.

But a review of the records obtained by the *Star-Telegram* over three months through the Texas Public Information Act generally showed

that the biggest residential water users in Tarrant County were those with large acreages or with water features, such as pools.

Westover Hills has the highest per capita usage in the state at 1,051 gallons per day in 2008, the most recent data available on the Texas Water Development Board's website. Those numbers reflect the amount used by homeowners, since the city has no commercial businesses. Under the same survey, Southlake residences used 250 gallons per day, and Haltom City 54 gallons per day.

Joseph Hawkins was Westlake's largest water user, with 3.3 million gallons in 2009. A family spokeswoman said his usage was inflated by constantly refilling a leaky swimming pool. Former Texas Ranger Mark Teixeira used 1.7 million gallons last year, or 4,600 gallons a day, at his Westlake home on a 1.08-acre lot. Teixeira doesn't live at the home, which is for sale. His real estate agent said he couldn't comment on the water usage. All top 10 water users in the elite community of Westlake used at least 1.6 million gallons a year.

In Southlake, the top six residences used more than 1.6 million gallons in 2009, more than 4,300 gallons per day.

In Arlington, all of the top 10 used more than 1 million gallons annually, and the top two in Mansfield used more than a million gallons annually.

In Fort Worth, evangelist T.D. Jakes used more than 3.2 million gallons last year on his 16-acre estate. It's unclear exactly how much he uses because Jakes asks that the amount be withheld. The charismatic leader of The Potter's House said he doesn't believe his water usage is excessive. "We are convinced the consumption is commensurate with the acreage for which we are responsible," Jakes said in a statement.

Six of the top 10 in Fort Worth in 2009 chose not to disclose their amounts, including billionaire Sid Bass and former RadioShack CEO Leonard Roberts. For the top three, all that is known is that they bought more than the 3.2 million gallons used by Steve Palko, the fourth-highest residential user.

Palko said he believes his water usage is appropriate for his Mira Vista home.

"The correct answer to your question is that 4 acres of planted land with water features [such as fountains] requires a lot of water, particularly in 100-plus-degree weather," said Palko, who also said that he uses his home for charitable fundraisers, where his guests expect nice surroundings "as they part with their cash."

Or as another Fort Worth resident on the list who asked not be identified stated: "These are not your typical-sized lots. You are talking multiacre sites. I don't think the usage is out of line for the size of the property."

'Water hogs'

Nevertheless, critics from across the state, as well as Oklahomans opposing the sale of water to Texas, have labeled North Texans "water hogs."

To try to encourage conservation, the Tarrant Regional Water District and Dallas County launched a multimillion-dollar public service campaign that seems to have had some success.

During August's 22 straight days of 100-degree temperatures -- the sixth-hottest August on record -- water usage was only 14 percent above normal, far less than the 40 percent surges seen in August 2000, said David Marshall, engineering services director of the Tarrant Regional Water District.

And the district has never had to ration water because of a short supply.

But as the population grows, so will demand. To meet expected needs by 2020, the district and the city of Dallas are already working on a \$1.6 billion pipeline to bring more water from Cedar Creek Lake and the Richland-Chambers reservoir.

Even with that project, more water will be needed after 2030, which is why the district has been pursuing a lawsuit against Oklahoma to secure water while still considering the Marvin Nichols reservoir in Northeast Texas and the Toledo Bend reservoir on the Texas-Louisiana border.

It will all cost billions of dollars.

The days of cheap water are coming to an end, said Jim Oliver, general manager of the water district.

"Our rates will double probably by 2020 just doing the things we're doing with the pipeline," Oliver said.

If high rates don't drive down water use, more conservation measures may.

Recently, the water district spent about \$22,000 on a direct-mail conservation campaign to reach the top 200 users in Fort Worth, Arlington, Bedford, Grapevine and Haltom City. It also sent notices to all the homes in Southlake and Westover Hills because of the heavy usage in those cities.

Within a couple of years, the water district plans to have a soil moisture update sent out through radio stations and other news media to

let people know whether they need to water. "Almost everybody in this area overwaters," Oliver said.

Besides public awareness campaigns, better efficiency can be encouraged through tiered rate structures, in which the largest users face steeper rates, said Mike Mocek, a senior project manager with Alan Plummer Associates. His firm is working on a water conservation strategy for the district.

Fort Worth has a four-tiered rate system that penalizes heavy usage. And Keller has a five-tier system for both residential and nonresidential customers to discourage excessive use and waste.

McCormick, of the National Wildlife Federation, said Colleyville's flat-rate billing is unusual. "Utilities are supposed to have water rate structures that do not encourage the excessive use of water," McCormick said.

Water cops

No one locally is willing to say cities and providers should follow the lead of San Antonio, where water cops actually issue citations.

Enforcement is difficult, city officials say.

Fort Worth's ordinances would allow it to issue fines for watering during banned times, but it has never done so.

"I'm sure there are other problems, but we can't rely on people telling us -- our people have to catch them in the act," said Mary Gugliuzza, a Fort Worth Water Department spokeswoman.

Instead, it asks people to comply. From January to July of this year, Fort Worth had 2,020 reported watering violations of both commercial and residential users. Of those, 72 percent were resolved when the department contacted the customer; 3 percent were resolved on second contact.

The rest were unsubstantiated -- workers either couldn't find the address or found no evidence of a violation.

Fort Worth isn't alone.

Mansfield can impose a \$40 fee on its water bills for a third violation. The city used it 10 to 15 times when it was implemented in 2007 but only "once or twice" in the last two years, said Joe Smolinski, utilities operations director.

Hurst and North Richland Hills have never issued fines for violations.

McCormick said few cities actively enforce their ordinances.

There is also the idea of shaming people to comply. Unlike in Tarrant County, San Antonio, for example, can disclose all residential usage figures regardless of the homeowner's wishes because of an exemption from state law.

"You can have certain parts of consumption that is open to the public scrutiny," said Karen Guz, director of water conservation for the San Antonio Water System and another member of the water conservation advisory council. "I will say it drives some shame to change behavior."

There has been some talk about asking the Legislature to devise an approach to track water consumption, which could allow targeting those who overuse. But rather than wait, the Tarrant water district is working on a plan to obtain detailed usage information from its own customers.

"I do think we have made strides," said Linda Christie, the water district's director of government and community relations. "Are we where we need to be? No, we are not, but we need to refine and develop our data going forward."

Christie, who is also a member of the conservation advisory council, said the district wants to be proactive.

"I'm telling our customers, 'If we don't start conserving water and become more efficient, laws will be passed,'" she said.

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Top residential water users for 2009. Some amounts have been withheld.

Fort Worth

1. T.D. Jakes
2. Sid Bass
3. John Kleinheinz
4. Steve Palko, 3.2 million gallons
5. William S. Davis, 3.1 million gallons
6. Jim Dunaway
7. David E. Minor, 2.9 million gallons
8. Leonard H. Roberts
9. Bruce R. Hartin, 2.7 million gallon
10. John B. King

Residential

1. Joseph Hawkins, 3.3 million gallons (Westlake)
2. Kyle K. Lewis, 2.7 million gallons (Arlington)
3. Name and amount withheld in Southlake
4. Jerry D. Beck, 2.1 million gallons (Southlake)
5. David and Sharon Gibbs, 1.8 million gallons (Westlake)
6. Matt and Shana Lepsis, 1.7 million gallons (Westlake)
7. Mark and Leigh Teixeira, 1.7 million gallons (Westlake)
8. Elisa Torres, 1.7 million gallons (Mansfield)
9. Molly Walters, 1.7 million gallons (Southlake)
10. Dr. G. Steeg, amount withheld (Arlington)

Top commercial users (2009)

1. Fort Worth: 2.3 billion gallons
2. D/FW Airport: 1.2 billion gallons
3. MillerCoors: 887.2 million gallons
4. Alcon Laboratories: 345.7 million gallons
5. Arlington school district: 326 million gallons
6. National Semiconductor: 331 million gallons
7. Lockheed Martin: 314.5 million gallons
8. Fort Worth school district: 293.9 million gallons
9. UT-Arlington: 274 million gallons
10. Arlington: 253 million gallons
11. Zoological Association: 219.2 million gallons
12. TCU: 211.3 million gallons
13. Tarrant County: 210 million gallons
14. Texas Health Resources: 195.1 million gallons
15. American Airlines: 192.6 million gallons

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