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City's water wasters, watch out

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The grand Craftsman for sale on 38th Street in east Sacramento looked every bit as wonderful as its $1.1 million asking price. It was nonetheless a scofflaw.

At 11 a.m. Tuesday, the 3,600- square-foot home was violating a new city rule that bans landscape irrigation between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

It also broke another rule in place for at least a decade: Sprinklers were flooding the gutter halfway down the block, violating a basic ban on water waste.

As the city rolls out new watering rules, it faces a daunting task: Sacramentans, who enjoy life at the confluence of two major rivers, have grown accustomed to limitless access to water – a regional perk that may now be history.

To hold onto its ample water rights, and to gain state approval for future water projects, Sacramento must demonstrate it uses water wisely. That's one reason for new watering rules, which are modest by California standards.

Spreading the gospel will be difficult.

Within just a few blocks in the well-educated neighborhood around the Craftsman, violations were easy to find.

The owner of the Craftsman wasn't home to answer questions about the over-watering.

Not far away, on 47th Street, 86-year-old Fred Troxel was apologetic about sprinklers running on his front lawn at 11:20 a.m. – another violation.

"I'll get that changed right away," Troxel said. "A lot of people are probably in the same situation as me. They're probably not aware of this yet."

Indeed, few Sacramento residents seem to know that, in the decade since the last major statewide drought in the early 1990s, landscape watering is allowed in the capital city only on alternate days.

Odd-numbered addresses, whether home or business, may water on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Even-numbered addresses get Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. No one waters Mondays. What's new as of last Friday is that the daytime watering ban has been extended two hours in the morning; it now runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., even on designated watering days.

Also new: Cars can be washed only on designated watering days, and only with a shut-off nozzle.

The biggest change comes this fall. When standard time is in effect, usually November through March, landscape watering will be allowed only once a week: Saturday for odd addresses, Sunday for even. These are permanent changes, not drought-related, and apply only to property owners who pay water bills to the city of Sacramento.

Though much of California is experiencing a third year of drought, the city of Sacramento never declared a water shortage this year or imposed specific drought-related watering limitations.

Instead, new rules are intended to move the city into alignment with standard practices throughout the state. Money savings are one benefit: The city could save millions of dollars in pumping and treatment costs.

City spokesman Maurice Chaney said employees have seen more water-waste reports to the city's 311 phone hotline since the new rules began Friday, and they have responded with more educational visits.

Because the rules have been in place only five days, he did not yet have numbers available to illustrate the increase.

The city has begun running public service announcements on two local radio stations, but has not yet directly alerted customers. That will happen with an insert in next month's utility bills, Chaney said.

The city also activated a new, educational Web site, www.sparesacwater.org.

"We have left some courtesy door hangers letting people know water waste was observed," he said. "Beyond that, our goal is to educate customers, so we haven't issued any violations at this junction."

The Utilities Department has three water conservation specialists to chase down violations. But all city workers and residents are being encouraged to report water waste.

Parks and Transportation personnel also are getting directives to improve conservation efforts. Landscaping will follow a three-days-a-week water schedule, and parks are to be irrigated at night.

An exception was seen Tuesday at Bertha Henschel Park in east Sacramento, where sprinklers chattered over a patch of grass at high noon.

Maintenance foreman Sheryal Leonard said the system was being tested after a broken valve was replaced. That kind of maintenance-related water use does occur routinely in many parks, she said.

But parks are billed for actual water use by the Utilities Department, she said, so it has an incentive to conserve.

"Obviously it's more and more to our advantage to watch what we water," she said.

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