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EDITORIAL: Water hogs should pay higher rates

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By now, pretty much everyone knows that Southern California is a semidesert disguised as a giant oasis, with our palm trees and water-gulping lawns. But knowing and changing have long been two different things.

No more. The region's major supplier is tightening the taps and requiring local water districts to do the same, cutting overall use by 10 percent.

In two weeks, the water district that serves Temecula and much of Murrieta will impose new restrictions on use, and soon after will drop the other shoe ---- a series of water pricing "tiers" that will hit heavy water users where it hurts: their bills.

The theory behind both ideas is sound, but in practice, Rancho California Water District is setting itself up for failure.

For instance, the new rules will be very difficult to enforce without "water cops" touring the area regularly. And in trying to be scrupulously fair with their new tiered-use billing structure, the district is planning to set the tiers based in part on the number of people in a household and on lot sizes.

A well-intentioned effort to be fair, but also one that is ripe for abuse. Will homeowners be on the honor system to disclose how many people live in a house and to report their lot sizes? Will water district staffers be required to do door-to-door head counts and bring tape measures to every home to verify information?

At times like this, we like to think everyone will work together to ensure success, but history has taught us otherwise. Some people will game the system; others will simply flout the rules and dare officials to do something about it.

Rancho Water ---- and the region's other water districts ---- need to come up with a simpler formula for determining a household's water use that is enforceable without intrusive measures and one that doesn't punish people who have already been conserving.

People who use modest amounts of water both indoors and out should not suffer unduly, but the higher tiers ---- the ones that will hit people who insist on irrigating their oases (along with the sidewalks and streets) in the full heat of the day ---- should be painful.

Imposing fines on flagrant violators can have some limited effect, but financial incentives will work better in the long run.

Additional information:

http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2009/06/12/news/californian/temecula/z534309c185f31251882575d300699c6c.txt">TEMECULA: Rancho district imposes water saving rules

http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2009/06/06/news/sandiego/zad7876065c429b14882575bb0061b247.txt">REGION: Drought rules set to debut