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Conserve or pay

The Sacramento City Council promises to get tough onwater-ordinance enforcement

By Cosmo Garvin

The city of Sacramento wants you to conserve water. And they really mean it this time.

Running through sprinklers is not addressed by Sacramento's new water ordinance, but if it was, it would probably be discouraged.

A suite of new outdoor-watering rules kicked in on Friday, June 12. The new water ordinance is a lot like the old water ordinance, but city officials say that now they are going to be enforced.

The new rules include:

• Odd/even watering days. If your address ends in an odd number, you can water on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. If your address ends in an even number, watering is allowed Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Nobody gets to water on Monday. This rule has actually been on the books for 10 years, but wasn't enforced before.

• No watering at all between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. during your watering day. The old rule was noon to 6 p.m.

• No washing your car without a shut-off nozzle on your hose.

• Winter watering will be sharply curtailed. Between November and March, you may only water one day a week. Odd addresses get Saturdays, even addresses get Sundays.

The rules say nothing about Slip 'n Slides, kiddie pools and filling up water balloons with the garden hose. "We don't have specific measures to address those activities," said Mike Malone, field supervisor with the Sacramento Utilities Department. "We'd probably discourage them."

There will be no water police cruising the neighborhoods looking for water scofflaws. At least, not yet. "That may be something we look at in the future, if necessary," said Malone. But city spokesman Maurice Chaney said city personnel are being asked to keep a lookout for abuses. Citizens are also being encouraged to snitch on their neighbors.

"We're imploring customers to keep their eyes and their ears open, and to call 311 if they see any water waste,"

Chaney explained. You can also call 311 to have someone from the city come to your home and assess your water usage and give you some tips for conserving.

If you get busted, your first offense will earn you just a warning. But it will cost you $25 for the second offense, $100 for the third and $500 for each violation after that. You can have that first $25 fine waived if you agree to go to a water-conservation workshop similar to traffic school. The new rules also give the Sacramento City Council power to declare a “water shortage” and impose additional restrictions in the case of drought or other special circumstances. Fines would be doubled during a declared water shortage.

The new water ordinance has been described as “baby steps” toward water conservation in a region that has been historically carefree in its water use. According to the State Water Resources Control Board, residential water consumption in the Sacramento region is about 258 gallons per day per connection. In the Bay Area, the rate is 157 gallons per day, and in Southern California, it’s 180.

“It’s a small step forward, but it’s not the most significant thing they could do,” said Chris Brown, executive director of the California Urban Water Conservation Council.

It is progress, said Brown, because the city is at least talking about enforcement, something it hasn’t done so far. “The approach they’ve taken has some potential for success. It remains to be seen whether they will be serious about enforcing it. The first few people that actually get fined, that will start waking people up.”

Brown said the city might have to get tougher to make a dent in water consumption. “If this doesn’t get people’s attention,” he said, “the city may have to consider higher fines.”

Brown also thinks fewer watering days, going to watering twice a week instead of three days a week, would be reasonable. But perhaps the biggest thing the city could do to curb residential water use is to push up its water-metering program. Right now, the city is planning to have all homes metered by 2025. That means many households won’t be metered for a decade or more.

“So few of their customers are getting any sort of clear price signal right now,” said Brown, adding that just introducing a water meter can cut consumption by as much as 20 percent.

City officials agree that metering is crucial to water-conservation efforts. “We’re exploring opportunities to get those in a lot faster,” said Malone.

Brown also lamented that the city lacks a clear goal for curbing residential water use. For example, the State Water Resources Control Board recently unveiled its “20 x 2020 Water Conservation Plan,” to reduce the state’s overall water consumption by 20 percent within the next decade. But nothing like that is being articulated to Sacramento citizens.

“We aren’t being told what the overarching goal is, and I think that would really help,” said Brown. “People want to do the right thing. If you give them a goal, they will change their behavior to meet it.”