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Water agencies reaping fruits of conservation efforts

By Anna Bakalis
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The call to reduce water use has been heard in Ventura County.

The Calleguas Municipal Water District, which supplies water to most of the county, on Wednesday reported a more than 15 percent decrease in water usage in July.

“We’re heading in the right direction,” said Eric Bergh, resources manager for Calleguas. “The message has been delivered.”

Calleguas established a supply allocation program on July 1, mandated by its supplier, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Given the state’s severe drought, Metropolitan’s goal is to reduce total water allocation by 15 percent by June 2010.

It was the first month of ramped-up public outreach to get people to conserve water. Some cities have declared water emergencies and limited lawn watering to three days a week.

July is typically the highest water-use month of the year, Bergh said. The month usually soaks up 12 percent of all water usage throughout the year.

In any given month, an average of 14,380 acre-feet of water is used by the 600,000 customers served by Calleguas. Last month, Bergh said, only 12,165 acre-feet were consumed.

While it’s a good start, Bergh said, it’s too early to ease up on conservation efforts.

“I feel comfortable with what we’re seeing,” he said, but it would be better to reduce consumption by 18 or 19 percent.

The cities of Simi Valley, Camarillo and Thousand Oaks have approved “Level 1” water shortage declarations. Level 1 limits landscape irrigation to three or four days a week between April and November and twice a week from November through March. Simi Valley was the first city to adopt mandatory water restrictions and most recently passed an ordinance allowing outdoor watering only on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Ron Fuchiwaki, the city’s public works director, said Simi has reduced overall water consumption by 13 percent.

“We missed the mark just a little, but it’s only the first month,” he said.

Simi Valley’s Web site, http://www.simivalley.org, has posted a gauge to monitor how far the city has to go to reach its monthly and yearly goal of 15 percent.

Between 60 and 70 percent of residential water use is outdoors, Bergh said. He wants customers to cut irrigation by 20 to 30 percent.

While Thousand Oaks does not yet know water consumption totals for July, public works director Mark Watkins said residents “are figuring out how to do the right thing.”

The city has limited lawn irrigation to three days a week. Watkins said the city gets an average of 20 calls a day from residents wanting to know how the city’s water-shortage ordinance affects them.

“By conserving water, you also save a bunch of money,” Watkins said.

Cities and other water distributors face huge penalties if they don’t meet the 15 percent reduction goal. They now pay Calleguas $796 per acre-foot of water. If they can’t make the 15 percent cut, the cost will rise to $2,513. And if they exceed that limit by more than 15 percent, the cost soars to $4,135.

Those costs would be passed on to customers, officials said.

In Southern California, precipitation has been below normal for eight of the past 11 years. After two years of below-average rainfall and snow melt and court-ordered restrictions on water transfers, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in February declared a drought emergency in California.

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