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An L.A. water scofflaw explains

Honest, officer, the sprinklers were just broken.

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Only about 1,400 of Los Angeles' 4 million residents have been cited by the Department of Water and Power for violating the city's new watering restrictions, which allow property owners to run their lawn sprinklers just twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Recently, The Times' editorial writer on water policy -- me -- became one of them.

My husband and I awoke on a Tuesday to the sound of running water and an aquatic display in front of our house that rivaled that at the Grove. Jets danced from our sprinklers into the street and bubbled over into a makeshift, sun-dappled pond. Our 3-year-old was delighted. The only thing missing was the Sinatra soundtrack.

The sprinkler system hadn't been programmed to water that day. That, after all, is prohibited by the city's watering restrictions, which I had explained and defended in editorials and which our household has devotedly followed. (I swear! We have the crispy lawn to prove it!)

We couldn't figure out how to shut the sprinklers off, so we called our plumber, who said he'd come by at 11 a.m. When the doorbell rang at 10:45, we expected to see his van parked outside. Instead, there sat a silver Prius. A friendly fellow wearing an LADWP cap was at our door. Drought Busters!

It wasn't as if we had intended the system to run, and it hadn't been broken for more than a few hours -- excuses, excuses -- but he slapped us with a "Water Conservation Ordinance Citation" admonishing us for watering on a "Non Watering Day." This time we got off with a warning. Next time, it'll be $100.

Had a snitching neighbor turned us in? Our Drought Buster said no, that he was just "in the neighborhood."

It's a good sign, I suppose, that the DWP is keeping such close tabs on all of us. When I first wrote about the program in a 2007 editorial cheekily headlined "Who you gonna call?," I mocked the idea of roving water cops, sniping that this "mighty band of six Department of Water and Power employees" (now there are 15, and they can write citations) would do about as much to save L.A. water as Dan Aykroyd and the Ghostbusters.

I guess I'm the punch line now.

-- *Eryn Brown*

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