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Riverside utility pushes more water conservation

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By JANET ZIMMERMAN
The Press-Enterprise

Customers of Riverside Public Utilities are eligible for city-funded rebates for water-saving devices, plus they can cash in on a regional program that increases the money back, city officials said.

"We're getting more aggressive as the drought and California's water situation worsens," said Clay Monroe, Riverside's water conservation coordinator.

City rebates come in the form of a credit on utility bills. For the regional rebate through Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, a wholesaler, customers must apply separately and online at www.socalwatersmart.com.

The emphasis is on "smart" controllers, which automatically adjust irrigation schedules in response to changing weather and environmental conditions. They can reduce outdoor water use by 40 gallons per day, or 14,600 gallons per year, according to industry estimates.

The city is offering $200 for controllers for less than 1 acre of landscaped area, which can be added to the $80 incentive from MWD. Controllers for landscaped areas larger than 1 acre are eligible for $25 per station from the city, and another $25 from MWD.

As part of the push to reduce outdoor water use, which accounts for at least one-third of residential water use, the city also offers free indoor-outdoor water audits for residential and industrial customers, Monroe said. The city also has a water-wise landscaping program that pays 40 cents a square foot for turf that is removed and replaced with drought-resistant plants. Up to 6,000 square feet per parcel is eligible.

The next most important area of savings, he said, is high-efficiency toilets that use 1.28 gallons or less per flush and can save up to 4,000 gallons per year. The city is offering an extra $100 for toilets, which can be added to the $50 rebate from Metropolitan.

High-efficiency clothes washers also are eligible. They earn $80 from the city, in addition to the regional program rebate of $50.

Synthetic turf rebates are $1 per square foot of turf installed, up to 1,000 square feet, added to the 30 cents per square foot that Metropolitan offers. The city also gives incentives of $4 each for high-efficiency sprinkler nozzles, which spray water more evenly than conventional spray heads, reducing runoff. They can save up to 6,600 gallon of water per nozzle over a five-year period.

The rebates, which began in 2000, have helped keep city water use level despite a growing population, Monroe said. Since 2002, rebates have been given on 2,702 washers and 3,798 toilets. The city also offers commercial

rebates.

Monroe estimates that one billion gallons of water has been saved with conversions to water-saving devices since 2004.

Rebates are less expensive than the cost of producing water, said Chris Brown, executive director of the California Urban Water Conservation Council in Sacramento, a statewide partnership of suppliers and environmental groups.

The rule of thumb is that once a rebate program has reached 75 percent of customers, it should be ended, he said.

"There comes a point of diminishing returns," he said. "After that point...you're going to more and more effort to get a smaller group."

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