

Santa Barbara water users respond to increased rates

Water customers reduce usage by 25 percent in August

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Santa Barbara water officials are crediting the city's drought-related rate increases for improved conservation efforts. According to the Acting Water Resources Manager, Josh Haggmark, customers cut water use by 20 percent in July and 25 percent in August.

The city declared a Stage 1 drought at the beginning of the year, and urged residents to reduce their usage by 20 percent. While water usage did decline some over the next few months, customers did not meet the 20 percent goal.

The City Council declared a Stage 2 drought condition in May, enacting the higher water rates in addition to mandatory water use restrictions.

"We've seen significant progress since rates took effect in July," Mr. Haggmark told the Santa Barbara Board of Water Commissioners on Monday.

He said the city saw great conservation from all segments of the community, from single family residents to agriculture users. "Everybody is contributing to the citywide reduction," Mr. Haggmark said. "We just have to keep it up."

In order to encourage those efforts, the city has budgeted about \$700,000 on conservation outreach, including education, advertising and rebate programs.

One example is the Smart Landscape Rebate Program. Residents are able to apply for reimbursements to cover the costs of water-saving improvements.

From January to August of last year, the city received 65 applications for the program. During the same period this year, 324 residents applied for the program, said Madeline Ward, the city's Water Conservation Coordinator.

As long as residents continue to meet the 20 percent reduction goal, the city should have sufficient water sources to meet its needs for the next water year, if drought conditions continue. Over the past several months, the city worked with the Central Coast Water Authority to purchase supplemental water from a number of sources to help meet its customer needs, explained Mr. Haggmark. "We have secured water sufficient to meet demands for next year, as long as community continues to meet its goals."

However, if there is no significant rainfall next year, the city will have to consider more drastic measures, including reactivating the Charles Meyer Desalination Facility. "It will be critical to get the desal online by the end of 2016 to meet demands, if there are no reservoir inflows or state water," Mr. Haggmark said. "If we have another year of no rain, and no inflows, in 2017 we would consider increasing the desal facilities production ability."

If that happens, the city would likely have to raise water rates once again, Mr. Haggmark said.

The city is currently working with a consultant on a rate study to determine what the new rates may look like.

He said he'd likely have some estimates when he gives a presentation to the city council on Sept. 23.

While reactivating the desal facility is a "worst case scenario," according to Mr. Haggmark, the city is moving forward with plans to do so, to make sure it is ready, if the need arises.

The current schedule calls for the city council to select a contractor to design, build and operate the facility by April of next year, and to have the facility up and running by Summer 2016, Mr. Haggmark said.

The commission was expected to discuss selecting one of its members to serve on panel that will help select a contractor to work on the desal plant. The agenda item was dismissed. Mr. Haggmark told the commissioners the city attorney recommended against having a commissioner on the panel, as it may cause a conflict of interest.

Several of the commissioners disagreed with the decision, but asked that the city find other creative ways to ensure that the commission be involved in the selection of a contractor.

During its last meeting, the water commission had asked the city's Water Resources staff to prepare a report looking at alternatives for influencing water usage, including enacting penalties or rationing.

Kelley Dyer, the City's Water Resources Supervisor, presented them with an update during Monday's meeting.

She explained that penalties would target high water use within each customer class, while rationing would punish those customers who used more than their allotted water, eventually resulting in flow restriction or even shutting off water completely.

Water resources staff did not recommend either method at this time.

"Rationing and penalties are not a part of the city adopted water contingency plan," said Ms. Dyer. "We currently have a program in place that works, and lots of tools left in our toolbox if needed," Mr. Haggmark added.

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