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Experts take water-saving outside

Regional summit discusses efficiency

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Efforts to dramatically reduce outdoor water use in San Diego County gained momentum yesterday when top water industry officials, environmentalists and landscapers convened for the region's first Water Conservation Summit at the University of San Diego.

The event was designed to generate a long-range plan that would more than double the amount of water currently conserved in the county. The San Diego County Water Authority aims to save 100,000 acre-feet of water annually by 2030, enough to serve 200,000 homes.

“The idea that we can keep building pipe and (that) water will be at the end of that pipe is not true any longer,” said Maureen Stapleton, general manager of the water authority, which hosted the summit.

Suggestions that emerged yesterday included paying residents to replace grass with drought-tolerant landscaping, requiring water-efficiency audits when homes are sold, increasing water rates to promote conservation and retrofitting leaky irrigation systems.



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune

Aaron Lindsey loaded irrigation pipes for delivery in San Diego yesterday. Residential irrigation systems waste too much water through leaks and runoff.

Initial efforts are more likely to focus on publicizing ways to save water outdoors, showcasing “California friendly” gardens and creating industry alliances to offer a full range of conservation tools for homeowners, property managers and developers.

“This is really just the beginning of what we think will be a very successful collaborative effort,” said Mark Weston, the conference's moderator and general manager of the Helix Water District.

Some of the ideas could end up as local ordinances or in state legislation. Others may rely on voluntary measures and financial incentives for residents.

There's agreement up and down California that residential irrigation systems waste too much water through leaks, evaporation, runoff and over-watering.

Still, it may prove difficult for the water authority to create a strategy that pleases everyone. For instance, water districts typically reject outside efforts to tinker with their rates. Also, some landscapers dislike the idea of a grass-reduction campaign because they see it as “an attack on plants,” said Larry Rohlfes, assistant executive director of the California Landscape Contractors Association in Sacramento.

Water experts say it's difficult to get the public engaged in conservation efforts before an emergency arises, such as the drought that slashed San Diego County's water supplies in the early 1990s.

Pat Mulroy, general manager of the Southern Nevada Water Authority, said a similar situation could be in the making. She said several years of drought on the Colorado River means that one of San Diego's chief water sources is in serious jeopardy.

“The best way to protect yourself as a homeowner is to use less (water),” she said.

Ways to conserve outdoor water

- Check and adjust your irrigation system and timers at least once a month. Fix problems promptly.
- Use the landscape calculator at www.sandiego.gov/water/conservation to set an irrigation schedule.
- Irrigate during off-peak hours, generally at night.
- Check the soil's moisture level before watering.
- Replace grass with plants that don't require much water.

SOURCE: SAN DIEGO COUNTY WATER AUTHORITY

Mulroy and other water officials said it can be tough to alter widespread ideas about what kind of plants are attractive and difficult to ask people to change their everyday habits, for instance, to maintain their irrigation systems regularly.

To date, drought-proofing efforts in San Diego County include recycling wastewater for industrial and irrigation uses. The city of San Diego is also considering using super-purified sewage to augment its supply of drinking water.

At the consumer level, water-saving measures in the region have focused largely on upgrading water-intensive appliances such as toilets and washing machines.

Now, outdoor conservation efforts are sprouting nationwide as the U.S. population reaches 300 million and scientists warn that global warming may reduce the amount of snowfall that feeds major rivers, particularly in the West.

Earlier this year, for example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency rolled out a branding program to help consumers identify water-efficient products, including irrigation equipment.

Widespread conservation could reduce the need for new dams and reservoirs, saving consumers money and sparing the environment from being altered. Aggressive water-saving programs also help lessen the threats posed by droughts.

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