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Communication is key to water conservation

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We are in a drought, with no end in sight.

Due to court-ordered restrictions on pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, reduced allocations from the Colorado River, and below-average rainfall and snowmelt, we face the high likelihood of mandatory restrictions on water use and water rationing next year.

Nor is this a temporary situation. Some climate models predict that drought conditions are likely to continue throughout California and the West at least through 2011, if not longer.

Even if we get a wet winter or two, it would do little to alleviate the water shortage near-term. We need five seasons of above-average rainfall just to catch up. Efficient use of water is needed more than ever, not only for the immediate future, but for generations to come.

This calls for a paradigm shift in how we think about water.

Through a recent survey, the Olivenhain Municipal Water District found that many customers already have taken the easy steps toward water conservation, and we believe a significant number of people throughout the county have done so as well. They fixed leaky faucets and toilets, put shut-off nozzles on their hoses, stopped over-watering their landscaping and are taking shorter showers.

However, the survey also indicated that residents see the drought as a temporary situation. Our challenge now is to communicate more clearly and take conservation to the next level, with customers replacing unused lawn with low-water-use plants and xeriscaping, using weather-based irrigation controllers and replacing older, high-volume toilets and clothes washers.

The survey also found that its customers regard the district as a reputable resource for information on water supply and drought issues, and their preference is to receive this information through direct mail via their water bills.

Based on this feedback, the OMWD is launching a public outreach campaign to clearly communicate that, in the words of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, "We must recognize the severity of the crisis we face." We must ratchet up our efforts to motivate residential customers to further reduce water usage.

Major components of the campaign include a monthly newsletter and informative bill inserts that convey the facts about our drought and shrinking water supply, and the steps residents can take to further reduce their consumption.

Other features of the campaign include a new drought-related Web site and direct communications with homeowners' associations, agricultural growers and high-volume commercial users, as well as encouraging the use of recycled water, where available.

In addition, the OMWD adopted a drought ordinance that prohibits new service connections at Drought Intensity Level 2 or higher (unless a building permit has already been issued), the first water district in the county to do so. The district also is seeking new water sources, including desalinated water from the facility being built in Carlsbad, which will provide 10 percent of the district's needs by 2011. The district has expanded its recycled water program so that golf courses, open spaces and commercial and HOA common areas now receive recycled water.

However, the easiest and least expensive way to reduce demand and safeguard our water supply is through conservation. And we have learned that the key to conservation is through conversation with our customers.

As water agencies, we are working to diversify our supply portfolios and plan for the future. This is not a short-term problem, and there is no silver-bullet fix. Desalination, fixing the Delta, recycled water and conservation are all tools we can use to address this challenge. However, communication with our customers, to change the way they think about water and use it in our semi-arid desert will be the key to our water future.