

County ready for onset of dry season

Water districts have 4-stage plan

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Water woes

Though there is plenty of water in local reservoirs, San Diego County could have a shortage of treated water this summer. About half of the county's potable water comes from a treatment plant in southern Riverside County that ran over capacity dozens of times last year. Officials fear that continued growth, combined with a hot summer, could stress the system. They have created a plan, in case of a water shortage, that would first call for voluntary conservation and then enforce cutbacks if the message is not heeded.

Record rainfall has poured a bounty of water into local reservoirs. Since the start of the rainy season last year, storage levels have risen from 32 percent to 80 percent. Most of the water came from the sky, while some is extra water pumped into the county from the north.

Despite the abundance of precipitation, a hot summer still could leave San Diego County thirsty.

High demands on a treatment plant in southern Riverside County, which produces up to half of the drinking water used locally, could cause officials to urge residents and businesses to conserve more than usual. If that fails, they are prepared to cut supplies to avoid straining the system.

Running the plant so close to the edge leaves the region vulnerable to cutbacks. A severed pipe, problems at a treatment facility or an extended period of hot, Santa Ana winds could initiate a plan that could leave some spigots dry.



"With additional conservation and coordination, we are hopeful that we won't need to implement the (conservation) plan," said Gary Eaton, director of operations at the San Diego County Water Authority.

The problem stems from the Metropolitan Water District's treatment plant at Lake Skinner, which mostly treats water imported from the Colorado River. MWD, which serves 18 million people from Ventura to San Ysidro, supplies San Diego County with up to 90 percent of its water.

Last year, the plant ran above its rated capacity 41 times to keep up with demand. Since then, thousands of new customers have connected to the Lake Skinner plant for their drinking water, leading officials to expect the facility to once again run over capacity.

The plant, which serves 3.5 million people in San Diego and southern Riverside counties, produces up to 520 million gallons a day.

Locally, most of the plant's water is used in North County.

The city of San Diego, along with other water districts in the county's southern end, rely more on imported raw water that is treated at local facilities. San Diego alone produces about one-third of the area's local treated water.

MWD is confident no one will be left dry.

"(Last summer) we were pushing the plant, but we didn't exceed regulatory limits," said Brian Thomas, MWD's chief financial officer. "We fully expect to meet demands."

If MWD falls short, the San Diego County Water Authority, along with water agencies in southern Riverside County, have agreed on a four-stage plan to manage the shortage.

If the Lake Skinner plant exceeds 95 percent of capacity, local water districts will be alerted and asked to conserve more water.

If the plant reaches 105 percent of capacity, the public will be urged to use less water. For example, homeowners will be asked to voluntarily "take a day off from the regular watering schedule" for the yard.

If demand rises to the point where it exceeds the plant's total capacity, other agencies will be asked to help. At this third stage, local districts such as San Diego may be relied upon to distribute water to neighboring districts or run their plants to the highest capacity. The public will also be warned to reduce water usage or face cutbacks.

If none of those measures work, then mandatory reductions would be enforced. Managers will determine the difference between water production at Lake Skinner and public demand. The deficit will equal the amount by which water deliveries will be reduced to San Diego County and other areas.

"It's a graduated plan to let people know and help solve the problem," said Eaton, of the San Diego County Water Authority.

Permanent solutions are at least two years off. MWD is expanding Lake Skinner, but the project will not be completed until January 2007. The expansion will increase the output by more than 20 percent to 630 million gallons a day.

The county water authority is in the planning process for a new treatment plant in North County that would produce 100 million gallons of water per day, but it won't be ready until summer 2008. The \$170 million facility will be in Twin Oaks Valley near San Marcos.

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