

'Drought Patrol' checks Santa Cruz water users

By KATHY SALAMON
STAFF WRITER

Joan Kavage grabs her two-way radio and briefcase full of papers, ready to start a tour of duty with the Drought Patrol.

She has been working since 6 a.m. on this first day of operation of the patrol — the Santa Cruz Water Department's method of seeing to it that customers are conserving water.

Kavage sports a white T-shirt with large black letters saying "Drought Patrol." This matches the white Chevrolet city truck, with stickers saying "Drought Patrol" emblazoned on the sides.

"There's no job description for this job, so I don't have a job title," she said. "I think of myself as a water control representative."

It is Kavage's job to patrol various areas of the city to look for blatant violations of the city's water-conservation measures.

Rainfall has been seriously low this year, following a dry year last year, and the city water supply is depleted.

Santa Cruz relies almost completely on surface water, which is most affected by low rainfall. Other water districts in the area, such as Soquel Creek and Watsonville, pump water from below ground. So far at least, those districts haven't been significantly affected by the sparse rainfall.

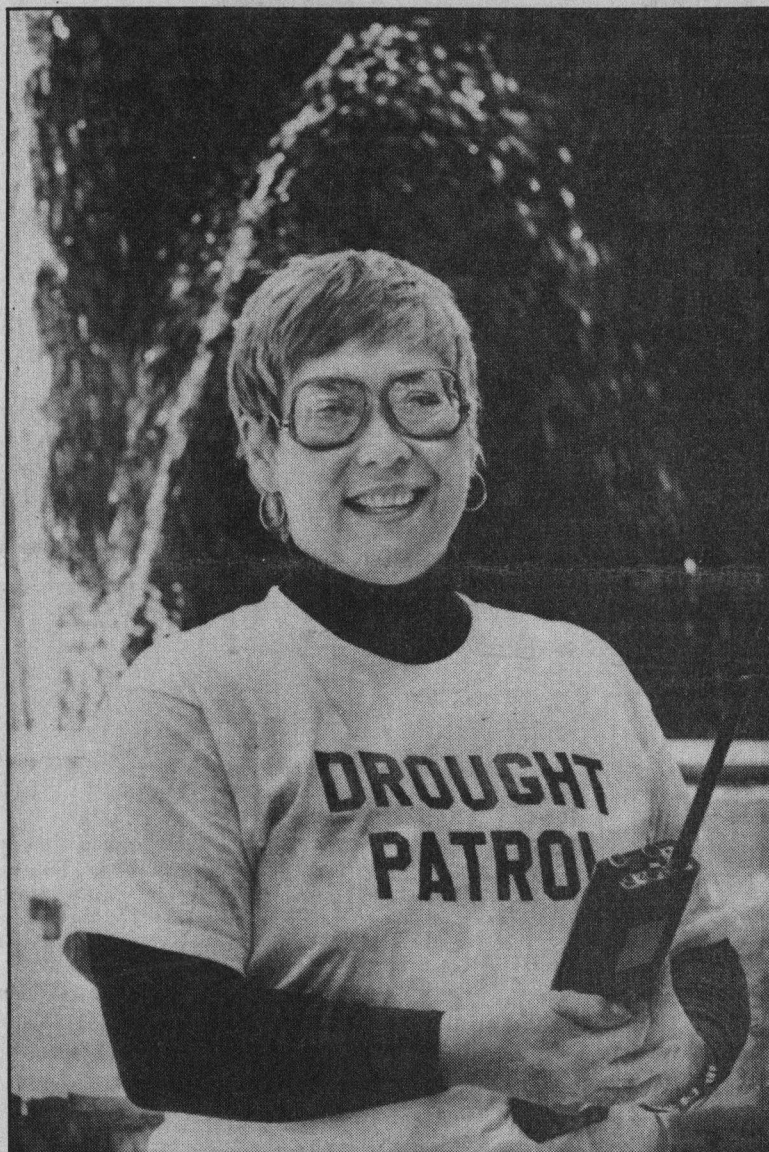
But Santa Cruz is now asking its customers to cut water use voluntarily by 10 percent. If significant cuts in consumption aren't made now, the city will be rationing water in the summer.

The city Water Department serves businesses and residences not only within the city limits of Santa Cruz, but also in the Pasatiempo, Live Oak, the North Coast and Santa Cruz Gardens area, and Capitola to 41st Avenue.

"Between 6:15 and 7:15 this morning, I gave out nine tags," Kavage said. "Two were for non-use of trigger nozzles and the rest were for in-ground sprinklers that need to be adjusted."

For a first infraction of the city's water-conservation ordinances, Kavage leaves a "tag" that outlines the nature of the offense. Kavage also makes a note of the problem and the address of the offender in her book.

She will come by and check in the following days to be sure the problem has been



Chip Scheuer

Joan Kavage is dressed for her job.

corrected. If it hasn't, the city can cut off the water supply to the house or business and can fine the customer \$100 per day for every day the problem is not corrected.

Kavage will also respond to any complaints from residents who see another customer misusing water.

"The staff is having a hard time keeping up with all calls from people reporting on their neighbors," Kavage said. "I think people who are conserving get mad when they see someone who is not concerned about conserving. They get angry because if we don't all conserve now, we'll go to rationing, and no one wants that."

Later in the morning, things are slow for the Drought Patrol.

"Most people seem to water early before they go to work or in the evening when they come home," Kavage said.

In a green, lush neighborhood in Pasatiempo, Kavage — always on the lookout for

hoses, sprinklers and leaks — spots a sprinkler.

A short inspection shows the sprinkling water to be landing only on lawn and it appears the water hasn't been on very long. That sprinkler seems to be OK.

"I stopped at Dominican Hospital this morning," Kavage said. "They had all the sprinklers going with too much overflow going onto the pavement. They need to adjust their system."

Kavage left a tag with a groundskeeper at the hospital and made a recommendation that the city follow up the tag with a letter to hospital administrators.

"So far, things have gone very well, but of course, this is just the first day," Kavage said. "I get a lot of stares. People seem to think, 'I guess they really mean business.'"

For now, the Drought Patrol will operate between 6 and 10 a.m. and 4 to 8 p.m. on weekdays. On weekends, city workers will be out all day with the Drought Patrol.