

CITY PUSHES THE LIMIT WITH TOUGHEST RATIONING LAWS

Water Supply 2000

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PHOTOS BY PATRICK TEHAN — BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Nik Martinelli, a water conservation representative for the city of Santa Cruz, checks a plant irrigation system at a church in Santa Cruz on July 29. The city has put in place what may be the toughest rules in the state to conserve water during the drought.

By Paul Rogers

Bay Area News Group

SANTA CRUZ » In most California cities, if you see neighbors on the sidewalk this summer, they're probably jogging or walking their dogs.

But in Santa Cruz, there's a new pastime: People lifting up the cement covers in front of their houses to read the water meter.

This coastal city best known for its surfers, redwood trees and historic boardwalk amusement park has put in place some of the toughest rules in the state to conserve water during the

drought — mandatory water rationing for every home, with hefty fines and "Water School" for violators. There's even a ban on filling hot tubs.

And if California doesn't receive a healthy soaking of rain this winter after three years of historic drought, dozens of other cities may soon be following suit, experts say.

"Statewide we are facing a truly emergency condition," said Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. "We need the urban areas to start acting like that. Santa Cruz is the canary in California's water crisis." **RATIONS » PAGE 5**



Nik Martinelli, a water conservation representative for the city of Santa Cruz, finds a broken sprinkler head at an office park in Santa Cruz on Tuesday.

Rations

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ifornia's coal mine."

Across the San Francisco Bay Area and Southern California, hundreds of communities have adopted rules asking people to conserve water, but often with no fines or penalties for violators. Santa Cruz is much different.

Since May 1, every residential property has been allotted a monthly ration: 10 units of water, or 7,480 gallons, for a family of four, to cover all uses, including lawn watering. Each unit averages about \$3. But for people who go much above the limit, the cost skyrockets to \$50 per unit, meaning monthly water bills can easily top \$500 for families who don't conserve.

"It is a large deterrent," said Toby Goddard, administrative services manager for the Santa Cruz Water Department.

"But people are responding well," he said. "They are getting by. It's not like there's been a dramatic quality-of-life drop. People understand we're in a drought and things have been very dry."

The goal is to make sure the city has enough water next year in case the drought drags on, he said.

So far the tough rules appear to be working. Lawns everywhere are brown, and 92 percent of households lived within their rationed amount the first month.

When the Santa Cruz City Council approved the plan this spring, the goal was a 25 percent overall reduction in city water use, compared with the 2012-13 average. In July, city-wide water use was down 26 percent. By comparison, Gov. Jerry Brown asked all Californians in January to cut water use 20 percent when he declared a drought emergency, but in May statewide use was actually up 1 percent.

"What they are doing in Santa Cruz is pretty cool," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the State Water Resources Control Board. "I'm impressed."

Yet the strict rules in a city famous for its laid-back lifestyle have caused some headaches.

One man went to Hawaii on vacation for eight days, not realizing the flapper in his toilet tank was leaking. When he came back, he had a \$4,000 water bill. Others have similar tales of hydrologic horror.

"If our water bill goes much higher we'll have to take away our kids' cell phones," joked Nancy Alsip, who is trying to teach her family to conserve more after being hit with a \$225 penalty.

Most businesses have been exempt from the rationing, in an effort to boost the economy. But golf courses have been cut back nearly 50 percent. Property owners who rent beach houses to vacationers are worried that they, too, could be hit with big

bills.

Even the hot tub, the most Californian of accessories, is not untouched. The city's drought ordinance bans the filling of swimming pools and hot tubs. Dealers say people who use hot tubs take fewer showers.

"It's irrational. We're the wrong target," said Lynda Sisk, vice president of Hot Springs Spas.

Some small communities in California have tough rationing rules, such as Avalon, a community of 4,000 people on Catalina Island that gets most of its water from desalination, or Cambria, near Hearst Castle, which has a long history of water shortages. Pleasanton required property owners to cut water use 25 percent from last year or face fines, although penalties aren't as large as in Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz has the strict rules for three reasons. First, it's isolated. Because of the Santa Cruz Mountains, it's one of only a few counties in the state that imports none of its water. Second, the community has a long history of environmental activism, and politically the water department hasn't faced much pushback. And third, the city, which gets most of its water from the San Lorenzo River and nearby streams, has done very little to expand supply.

Over the decades, activists and city leaders have turned down numerous water projects, most re-

cently plans to build a desalination plant.

"I'm not going to second-guess what the locals chose to do," Quinn said. "That's their choice, and I respect that. But there is a consequence to your choice. And the consequence is what they are experiencing now."

Water use is already 96 gallons per capita per day in Santa Cruz, which is half the state average of 196.

The Santa Cruz Water Department, which serves 94,000 residents from UC Santa Cruz to parts of Capitola and the unincorporated community of Live Oak, is seeking more conservation. The department gives away free shower heads and shower timers.

It pays people to remove lawns, like other towns. It has two "water cops" who write tickets for irrigating during the daytime or hosing down pavement. And this year, the department set up a "Water School," similar to traffic school, where people who receive penalties on their monthly bills can get them waived once if they complete a two-hour class on water conservation. There's a one-month waiting list.

"We'd like to take longer showers and have a full-scale vegetable garden," said resident Jim Ryan, mulching his yard this week. "But I understand why they are doing it. I've lived here for 60 years. I've got buckets in the shower and rain barrels. I've seen droughts before."