

ENFORCEMENT

'Water cops' tag homes, threatening \$500 fines

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The water pooled on the sidewalk Monday morning, soaking the newspaper lying in the driveway and flowing into the gutter of the neatly kept house in northwest Santa Rosa.

TIPS TO REDUCE WATER USE

Reduce irrigation by 20%.

Find and repair leaks.

Inspect and tune-up irrigation system monthly.

Irrigate between midnight and 6 a.m. to reduce water loss from evaporation and wind.

Use a broom, not a hose, to clean driveways, decks or patios.

Use a bucket and a hose with an automatic shut-off nozzle when you wash the car, or take your car to a car wash that recycles water.

Cover pools and hot tubs to reduce evaporation.

Use front-load washing machines.

Run the dishwasher and clothes washer with full loads only.

Prevent and report water waste.

Source: City of Santa Rosa

"This is a pretty good indication, when the lawn is this uniformly green, that there is overwatering," said Dan Muelrath, Santa Rosa's water conservation coordinator and one of its "water cops."

Muelrath checked "Excess irrigation, water on sidewalk and in gutter" on a card, walked through the shallow puddles and left the card at the front door of the Piner Crest Drive home.

A woman at the house, who was retrieving her soggy newspaper, said they already had reduced the irrigation run time to eight minutes from 10 and still were trying to figure out their new controller.

"We've been trying to key it in and not get overspray," said the woman, who declined to give her name. "The controller is new for me; our gardener knows how to run it."

It was one of four houses Muelrath tagged within an hour during his morning patrol. In each case, sprinklers were running and water was flowing freely over sidewalks. He made a note to alert his staff to check three other houses and a business that had water covering the sidewalk.

They will be given 30 days to fix the problems or will face the possibility of \$500 a day in fines -- or even have water turned off.

It is all part of the city's stepped-up water conservation program that includes patrols by Muelrath and three full-time "water cops" during the day and at night. They look for homes and businesses where there is overwatering or signs of broken irrigation or plumbing systems.

The city has also set up a hot line, 543-3985, for water waste reports.

It is all in response to a call for conservation by the Sonoma County Water Agency, which was ordered by the state in mid-June to cut the amount of water it takes from the Russian River between July 1 and Oct. 28 by 15 percent from the same period in 2004. The water is to be kept in Lake Mendocino, which is historically low, to be released for the fall run of chinook salmon.

After the first 15 days, the Water Agency is well behind its goal. Use has dropped just 9.9 percent below the 2004 level.

If the Santa Rosa doesn't meet its goal or if the Water Agency calls for an even higher conservation level, the city has an emergency program prepared.

The program has several levels that include rationing, no water for irrigation, pools and fountains and rules that water for new construction must be offset by savings elsewhere.

Santa Rosa is the largest contractor of the Water Agency, serving 48,700 homes and businesses and accounting for 40 percent of the agency's Russian River diversions.

The other major contractors are Rohnert Park, Windsor, Cotati, Petaluma and Sonoma and the Valley of the Moon and two Marin water districts.

Muelrath said Santa Rosa has had a voluntary conservation program in place since the late 1970s, when severe water restrictions were put into place because of a drought.

The city has allocated \$500,000 for its current, three-year conservation program, primarily for a rebate system that gives \$150 for low-flow toilets, \$100 to \$150 for front-loading washing machines, up to \$350 for irrigation systems and 50 cents a square foot to replace lawns.

As part of the patrols, the city employees are particularly looking at homes that records show have high monthly water use, Muelrath said.

He said the city will provide advice and even send workers to houses and businesses tagged by the city's crews to help.

"We know that we can't get 15 percent from everyone, but we know that there are some people that we can get 50 percent from just because they are overwatering," Muelrath said.

He said preventing water waste in irrigation will meet the overall 15 percent goal.

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