

Long Beach water ban dripping with success

The town's consumption hit a 10-year record low in September, in part thanks to an edgy public relations campaign.

By Deborah Schoch

Since Long Beach ordered mandatory curbs on water use this fall, its Water Department has turned to unorthodox tools to spread the word.

"STOP Wasting Water," urge the crimson warnings on the front pages of local weekly newspapers. A YouTube video, shot hidden camera-style on a Long Beach street, shows water shooting from a broken lawn sprinkler as a timer ticks off the minutes to the dramatic chords of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The caption: "Come on. . . . Enough is enough. CONSERVE."

Kevin Wattier, the department's general manager, has even invited journalists to his home to see how he ripped out his lawn in favor of drought-tolerant plants, tile and artificial turf.

Water demand is outstripping supply in the region, Wattier says, and it's time for permanent change. "We've gone through a tipping point. This is not a temporary thing. This is a lifestyle change," he said.

The approach is working.

Water consumption has dropped markedly in the three months since Long Beach became the first sizable city in California to mandate restrictions, city reports show.

September water use set a 10-year record low, dropping 8% from the same month last year. It fell 5% in October and 6% in November, another record.

The department designed the campaign in-house with a \$70,000 budget and a two-person communications staff.

By contrast, Los Angeles water use rose almost 1% in the five months after Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's June 6 call for a 10% voluntary cut. The San Diego County Water Authority saw disappointing results with its "20-gallon challenge," a call for each resident to conserve 20 gallons daily.

"These things do take time," said Ken Weinberg, director of water resources for the authority, which plans to increase its advertising. Los Angeles may opt for stronger measures, and Pasadena is set to announce a new conservation program today.

In Long Beach, much of the credit goes to residents who have cut back on lawn watering, Wattier said. Watering is allowed only three days a week, only at night and only for 10 minutes.

Using regular hoses to wash sidewalks, patios and parking lots is also banned, a point driven home in another YouTube video that shows a woman hosing down a driveway, with a yellow smiley-face logo added to shield her identity.

Instead of ticketing, the department relies on tipsters to anonymously report scofflaw watering.

The first offense brings a polite letter, the second a personal visit. Few residents violate the rules twice, said Ryan Alsop, the department's director of government and public affairs.

Such success stands out amid mounting water woes.

An eight-year drought has significantly lowered the Colorado River, and snowpack remains slight in the Sierra Nevada.

And on Friday, a U.S. District Court judge in Fresno issued a final order intended to protect the endangered Delta smelt that will reduce water deliveries to Southern California by as much as 30%.

Worried cities are paying close attention to the state's largest water wholesaler, the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which receives water from the north and the Colorado River and sells it to 26 member agencies from Ventura to San Diego.

Los Angeles is currently buying a historic high of 75% of its water from the MWD, compared with 34% in years when Eastern Sierra water was more plentiful.