

San Diego assigns 11 water cops to check waste

By Mike Lee, Union-Tribune Staff Writer

June 28, 2009



Julie Olson, an inspector for the San Diego Water Department, checked out two areas near San Diego State University for water runoff. (John Gibbins / Union-Tribune) -

WATER COMPLAINTS: BY THE NUMBERS

In the first 19 days of June, the San Diego Water Department started 459 investigations into water waste based on complaints by customers and employees.

167: excessive irrigation

21: washing paved areas

93: watering on wrong days

20: broken sprinkler

60: other

18: irrigating between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

29: water runoff

16: improper vehicle washing

27: leaks

8: ornamental fountain running

As San Diego water cop Julie Olson drove through the College Area one recent morning, she noticed damp curbs and small puddles along Campanile Drive and Montezuma Road.

After poking around the neighborhood, Olson concluded that an apartment complex and some homes seemed to be overwatering their yards.

She issued notices to the property owners, reminding them that letting irrigation water run down the streets is illegal as the region – and state – remains locked in drought.

“I do plan to make another trip out (here) and make sure I had some effect,” Olson said. “Because this is so new to all of us, we want to learn what works.”

San Diego's mandatory water restrictions took effect June 1, and the city is on pace to open 725 investigations into water waste by month's end. That's about nine times more than what the city averaged before June.

Countywide, most water districts are asking employees to look for water-use problems as part of their everyday duties. But San Diego has taken the lead by dedicating 11 employees to full-time water sleuthing.

From Carlsbad to La Mesa, water officials are seeing heightened interest in conservation. They're bracing for more complaints about water waste starting July 1, when almost all of the region's water agencies will launch stricter rules.

All the attention on how to cope with drought seems to be working. Municipal and industrial water use countywide was down about 13 percent from January through May of this year compared with the same period in 2007, the baseline year.

Water managers said conservation is even more important in summer, when water use is typically at its peak. At the least, they want to achieve an 8 percent reduction going forward.

"We are really encouraged by the reaction that we seem to be getting in water use and people's awareness," said Ken Weinberg, a top manager at the San Diego County Water Authority. "This issue is top-of-mind for the public."

People not thinking about it are increasingly likely to get a reminder from their water supplier.

Leaders of water districts said their goal is to encourage customers to do the right thing, not punish them. It's often tricky to verify the source of a violation, so the agencies usually take an educational approach with property owners.

Poway has its Neighborhood Water Awareness Program. The Fallbrook Public Utility District offers a water-waster notice on its Web site so customers can print the material and give it to their neighbors.

The Helix Water District receives about 15 phone calls and e-mail messages a week about water-use problems. The call volume has been steady in recent months, but spokeswoman Kate Breece expects the number of complaints to rise in July.

Carlsbad officials also are preparing for a larger wave of reported violations starting this week.

"We will first send a letter to the property owner," said Kristina Ray, spokeswoman for Carlsbad. "If a second complaint is made, we will do a visit and leave a door-hanger (reminder). If we get a third complaint, we will make a personal contact."

San Diego – by far the largest retail water agency in the county – started mandatory conservation June 1.

The city had relied on a single person to follow up on about 80 water-waste complaints a month. But once conservation became mandatory, more residents were quick to rat on their neighbors.

Now, San Diego's water-waste team includes five field representatives including Olson, three code-enforcement agents to handle egregious violators, two people to answer a water-waste hotline and a unit supervisor.

Complaints range from polite and informative to angry and confusing, according to a sampling of e-mail messages that residents sent to the city June 17. San Diego officials redacted the names and addresses, saying they needed to protect people's privacy.

In one case, a member of a local gym reported that shower faucets weren't marked to show which side is hot, so people were letting them run while they tried to figure it out.

Someone else complained about a sprinkler irrigating a sidewalk, and another person alleged that a polo field was being watered outside San Diego's prescribed hours.

"We need to stop these water wasters," one e-mail said.

The notes also show how slow the conservation-education system can be.

"It has been almost two weeks since I reported my HOA running the irrigation sprinklers EVERY day," one resident wrote.

A water-waste analyst for the city responded to the resident, saying the homeowners association would be contacted that day.

"We alone cannot do this effectively," said Luis Generoso, water resources manager for San Diego. "We need the help of people to tell us where we need to investigate. . . . They are our eyes and ears."