

WATER SHORTAGE LOOKING TO CONSERVE

County steps up water efforts

Next: Officials want state to help limit usage, feds to free more water from Lake Sonoma

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Freaked out and flummoxed that public pleas for water conservation aren't proving effective, the Sonoma County Water Agency is asking local grape growers and water customers, state and federal agencies for help in constricting the tap.
Photos by JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

Dan Mulrath, water conservation program coordinator for the City of Santa Rosa, writes a door tag noting excess sprinkler water flowing onto sidewalks and the street at a Santa Rosa home Monday. The county Water Agency is seeking a 15 percent water usage reduction, but usage has dropped just 9.9 percent in two weeks.

Water Agency officials said late Monday that two weeks' worth of water conservation has produced a meager 9.9 percent decrease in water consumption, far short of the 15 percent decrease ordered by the state Water Resources Control Board.

"Our agency is having a difficult time operating the Russian River system due to regulations and diversions outside the agency's control and service area," said county supervisor Tim Smith, who also serves as a Water Agency board director.

The Water Agency says it lacks regulatory authority to do much more than cajole conservation out of private agriculture or the municipalities that supply water to about 600,000 residents in Sonoma and northern Marin counties.

So it wants the state Water Resources Control Board to help bring government and agriculture in line. Last week, state water board officials said they were prepared to take measures to enforce the order, even ordering the shutdown of water pumps.

Because the Water Agency's call for help was not released until late Monday, state officials did not have the opportunity to review it.

Here's what the Water Agency wants:

Grape growers in the Russian River, Alexander Valley and Dry Creek Valley to band together and cooperate on water diversions from the river.

Agency officials concede they are releasing water from the dam at Lake Mendocino with nothing but a guess as to how much agriculture -- mostly vineyards -- is sucking out downstream.

"No one benefits if stored water is lost to the ocean," said Bob Anderson, executive director of United Winegrowers of Sonoma County. "Hopefully we can find a way to cooperatively succeed in threading the needle."

The National Marine Fisheries Service not to interfere with the release of more water from Lake Sonoma.

Flow along the Dry Creek tributary into the Russian River is a focus of the federal agency, which is considering restrictions because too much water in summer harms coho salmon, an endangered species. A creek restoration plan from Marine Fisheries would help, Water Agency officials said.

Federal officials had not yet had the opportunity to review the request.

Cities -- like Healdsburg and Cloverdale -- that draw water from the Russian River, but don't get it from the Water Agency, to increase conservation efforts.

Cities that do get water from the Water Agency -- like Santa Rosa and Rohnert Park -- to undertake greater conservation that aims at the 15 percent reduction.

Agency officials said they are working with their contractors to develop accurate measures of water allocations so that cities and districts will know precisely how they are faring individually.

Smith said the Water Agency "is facing difficulties implementing the state-mandated 15 percent decrease in water use since 2004." He and other county officials have complained that the lack of water is, in part, a "regulatory drought" caused by restrictions imposed by federal agency rules on endangered species and by state-mandated reductions in water releases from Lake Mendocino.

All 116 pages of the Water Agency's "work plan" for dealing with the state-mandated 15 percent water-use decrease can be reviewed at www.sonomacountywater.org.

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