

Bee Exclusive: Capital gushes wasted water

Metropolitan region's per-capita use tops U.S. daily average as conservation pledges go unmet.

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Published 12:00 am PDT Thursday, June 19, 2008
Story appeared in MAIN NEWS section, Page A1

The Sacramento metropolitan region has so neglected water conservation that it now ranks as one of the world's most extravagant consumers of water, a Bee review has found.

Throughout California, urban water agencies have generally failed to make good on conservation promises made during the state's last major water fight.

No concentration of residents and businesses, however, uses as much as Sacramento: 25 percent more per capita on a daily basis than Las Vegas, and nearly 50 percent more than Los Angeles. Those cities have cut use despite massive growth.

Even excluding large industrial and agricultural users, the Bee's review of an array of water statistics found per-capita consumption here is greater than the U.S. daily average. It's also higher than urban use in Canada, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and a host of other developed nations.

Experts said the high rate of water consumption leaves California vulnerable to the current drought, declared this month by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In progress reports obtained by The Bee, only one of the capital region's urban water agencies reported progress on all 16 conservation goals they promised to meet in a 2000 agreement. None completed every task, and collectively they fulfilled only about half the goals they agreed to meet by the end of 2006.

The 16 conservation tasks agreed to by members of the Sacramento Water Forum came from a truce between water agencies and environmental groups.

Environmentalists agreed not to fight planned Sacramento and American river diversions if agencies promised to conserve.

The promises included water audits of homes and businesses, landscape standards for commercial development, water meters and low-flow toilets, public education and other programs.

Specific conservation target numbers were not included, and no penalties were put in place.

The findings call into question Schwarzenegger's reliance on local water agencies to voluntarily achieve his 20 percent conservation goal. The governor this month declared a statewide drought – the first time since 1991 – but with no immediate conservation orders.

The conservation data also conflict with California's reputation as environmentally progressive, and with Sacramento's desire to become a "green" city.

"Are people making the best effort? Some of them definitely have some catching up to do," said Tom Gohring, executive director of the Sacramento Water Forum, a consortium of water agencies. "I'd really love it if people who talk about sustainability would talk about the same thing in regard to water conservation."

Rivers pay a price

The cost in water volume of this neglect is hard to quantify.

But in one example that can be measured, the 15 Sacramento-area agencies collectively failed to install, via rebate programs, 26,214 low-flow toilets in commercial and industrial buildings (there was no residential goal).

Estimating conservatively, if each toilet saved 2 gallons per flush and was flushed twice a day, the region could have saved 118 acre-feet of water annually. That's enough to serve 240 average homes for a year, or to flood Capitol Park to a depth of 3 feet.

"The impacts of the drought are going to be worse than they would have been if we had improved our efficiency more over the last decade," said Peter Gleick, president of the Pacific Institute, an Oakland think tank. "There would be more water in our reservoirs, and demand would be lower. I think it's sad."

The consequences are particularly relevant this year, amid collapse of the Central Valley fall-run chinook salmon population. Many of those fish spawn in the American River, source for most of the region's tap water.

Habitat for salmon, steelhead and other fish – as well as recreation – would improve if Sacramento diverted less river water.

It also would alleviate an ecosystem collapse in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, where nine fish species are declining.

Instead, several Sacramento-area water districts are laying plans to divert more river flows to keep up with demand. Environmentalists are unhappy that conservation has been neglected.

"There could be a major blowup over this," said Terry Davis, conservation coordinator at the Sierra Club's Mother Lode Chapter. "More than ever, everything is under scrutiny, and every (water) purveyor is under a greater obligation to show they are making responsible use of their water supply."

Careless water use

Sacramento's wasteful ways are easy to find.

On Tuesday, Erlinda Walker used the blast from a hose to push leaf litter off the sidewalk in front of her 1st Avenue home in Sacramento's Curtis Park area.

"I know I shouldn't be using the hose to clean it off," Walker said. "But it's either that or the (leaf) blower."

Two doors down, lawn sprinklers spilled into the gutter. The temperature was 96 degrees.

At the end of the block, Marion Ivacian hosed off her sidewalk, porch, walkway – and the front of her green stucco house.

"I don't normally wash the sidewalk down," she said, "but my neighbor just had their tree trimmed, so I'm trying to clean it off."

On Wednesday, a state Department of General Services employee used a pressure washer to clean sidewalks around a state building on Capitol Avenue.

DGS spokesman Eric Lamoureux said the sidewalks are washed every Wednesday, as required by a contract with the restaurant on the building's ground floor, MVP Sports Grill.

"We manage millions of square feet of property, and when you look at public areas like that, people will spill gum, they'll stain the sidewalks with food, with any number of things," he said. "When we use the pressure washer, we try to use as little water as possible."

Poor compliance

Of the 15 capital-area water agencies that signed on to the Water Forum agreement, only one, the Placer County Water Agency, reported progress on every conservation task by the end of 2006 and it completed all but two.

Second-best was the San Juan Water District, which serves upscale Granite Bay and provides wholesale water to Folsom, Fair Oaks and Orangevale. The district fulfilled most of the goals but failed to install 156 low-flow toilets in industrial buildings.

San Juan's per-capita thirst is the greatest in the region – and perhaps in the entire state.

San Juan residents each used 494 gallons of water per day in 2006, according to Water Forum data. That's above the regional average of 287 gallons.

Yet, it's still saving: in 1986, San Juan's per-capita use was 787 gallons daily.

District General Manager Shauna Lorange blamed high consumption on landscape watering of residential parcels in the district that tend to be very large.

"Per-capita use is definitely going down," Lorange said of her customers. "We want to maintain the health in the American River as well as maintain a reliable water supply."

Other Water Forum members have much lower compliance.

The city of Sacramento completed none of the 16 conservation tasks and showed more than 50 percent progress on just one.

In a separate report by the California Urban Water Conservation Council, only two of 202 member agencies statewide – Rohnert Park and Santa Rosa – met similar water efficiency goals adopted by the council.

Council member agencies supply about 80 percent of urban water in California. Its data for a 10-year reporting period ending in 2007 were released to The Bee by Public Officials for Water and Environmental Reform, which includes some council members.

The council's conservation goals were adopted in 1997 after the state threatened to cut back water rights unless water agencies demonstrated "reasonable use." Under state law, "reasonable use" forbids waste.

"Obviously, voluntary measures are not succeeding," said Otis Wollan, board member of the Placer County Water Agency.

Meters coming – slowly

Sacramento-area water managers said convincing customers to conserve is difficult, because many homes still don't have water meters. This means waste carries no pricing penalty.

State law requires urban areas to be metered by 2025. Although Sacramento is making progress, it has a way to go: The city still has 106,000 meters to install.

Wollan said many water agencies refuse to spend enough on conservation.

The San Juan District, which has reduced its water demand, spends a relatively large 7 percent of its budget on conservation. Sacramento spends only 1.7 percent of its water budget on conservation. If meter installation is added in, conservation spending increases to 14 percent.

The city touts its water education and audit programs, both required by the Water Forum. But Sacramento completed only 5 percent of commercial meter installations, and only 7 percent of commercial toilet retrofits.

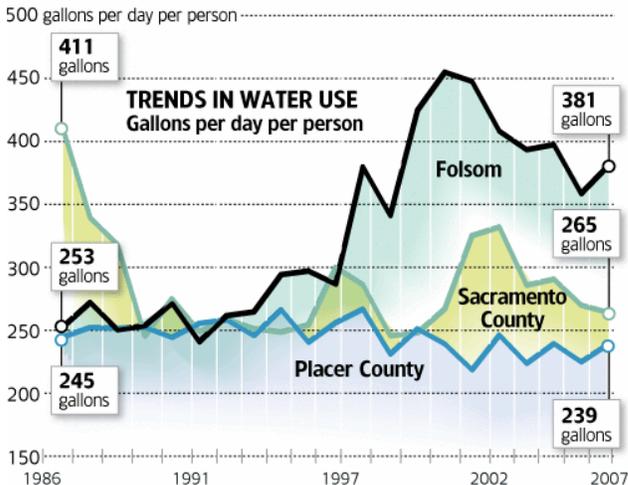
Sacramento installed none of the 10,731 low-flow toilets it promised, via rebates, for industrial buildings.

"We are working hard to do them, and we do face some challenges that are unique," city utilities spokeswoman Jessica Hess said.

"Conserving water is really important and it's going to help us not only during years like this. However, even taking that into account, additional (river) diversions will be necessary to meet long-term needs."

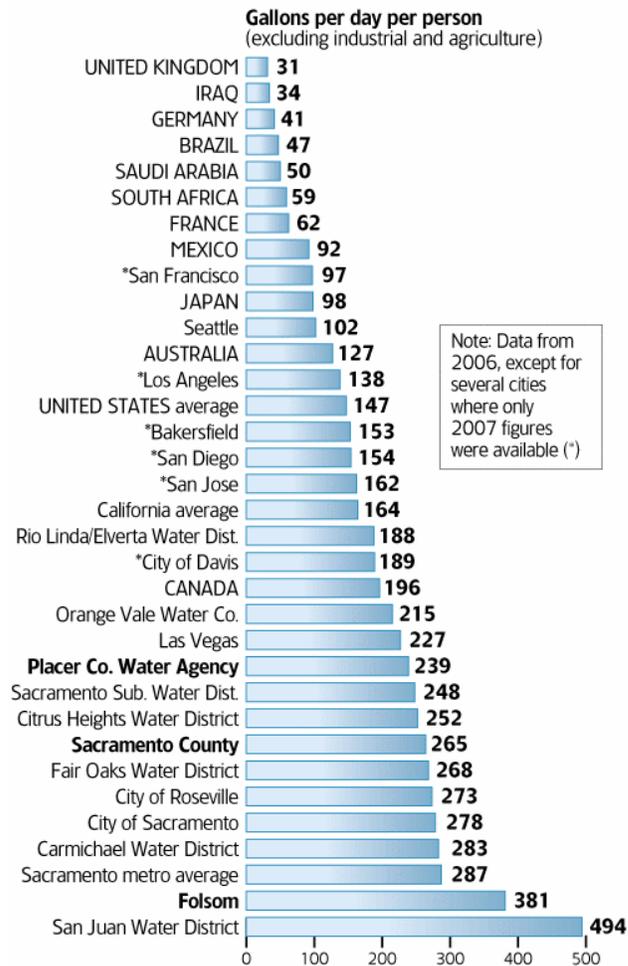
Water use, at home and abroad

Water consumption in the Sacramento region far exceeds U.S. and state averages, as well as that of most other nations.



Sources: City of Folsom, Placer County Water Authority, Sacramento County Water Agency

COMPARING URBAN WATER USE



Sources: Sacramento Water Forum, California Urban Water Conservation Council, Pacific Institute
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A state Department of General Services employee pressure-washes a sidewalk along Capitol Avenue on Wednesday. A spokesman said the walks are washed weekly, as required by a contract with a restaurant in the department's building. Carl Costas /