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2/24/09 | 43 views

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Drought deepens in region

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Philip Wood / Gold Country News Service

Beals Point at Folsom Lake. The lake is at its lowest level in years.



Warren Rager is on the front lines in the war against water waste.

As a nurseryman for Green Acres in Roseville, he knows first-hand where most homeowners go wrong: the lawn.

"At least half of the water applied to lawns doesn't do anything," Rager said as he cruised the sprinkler section of the store this week.

Despite a forecast that calls for rain, water officials are urging residents to take stock of their irrigation – and other water usage – as the state slides into an even deeper drought. Yet they know they are battling the incongruous imagery of winter weather.

"I think people are very sensitive to what this drought may mean, but where they have trouble making the computation is when they see this rain," said Rick Hydrick, operations manager for the San Juan Water District, which serves Granite Bay. "They think, 'This is great,' but it's really the snow and water content of the snow over the long haul that's going to get us out of this."

For now, the moisture content of Sierra snowpack – and the water levels of key state reservoirs – don't look good.

That could prompt San Juan this week to join a growing list week of water providers in mandating customers reduce consumption.

Roseville last week announced it was declaring a "Stage Two" water emergency, a step that requires residential customers to slash their usage by 20 percent. The move followed news that the city's water allocation from state suppliers would most likely be cut in half.

The Roseville restrictions will be enforced with extra patrols and possible citations, officials said.

"We don't want to overly concern the public, but it's a fact that we've had three sub par years," Hydrick said. "There's a lot of catching up to do."

Tips range from taking shorter showers to reducing toilet flushing. But officials say the easiest way for homeowners to meet the reduction goals is to adjust irrigation habits, though they haven't restricted lawn watering.

The good news, according to Rager, is that making adjustments isn't that hard.

"With a lawn, you may not have to change a thing, and just get a new controller for \$100," he said.

Some newer models have humidity and temperature sensors that can automatically reduce sprinkler duration during certain conditions. Rager also suggests residents ensure their sprinkler heads dump water only over the lawn; instances of "sidewalk watering" can be fixed with a cheap head attachment.

"And the minute the water starts running off the sidewalk and into the gutter, it should be shut off," he said.

A more involved upgrade might add a drip system, with microsprinklers, microsprayers and bubblers. The systems dramatically reduce water usage, but need to be positioned correctly.

Some techniques don't cost anything; keeping lawns taller – about 3 inches is ideal -- reduces their water needs, Rager said.

"A 20 percent cut in your water doesn't mean 20 percent of your yard has to die," Rager said.

Residents surveyed this week said they were planning on doing their part.

Roseville's Kinzie Arroyo said her family was cutting down on shower time.

"The only indulgence we have is the pool to swim in, so hopefully we can monitor the water we add and it doesn't cost extra," she said.

Roseville office worker Amanda Anderson said she likely wouldn't wash her car as much.

"Our biggest thing is we own a boat now, so having water in Folsom Lake is a big thing obviously," she said.

Still, some habits die hard.

"I'm a waster in the shower, seriously," Anderson said.