

GM NOTES JUNE 2015

Answers to Your Questions about the Drought

There has been a lot of media coverage of the drought lately and how it will impact water customers in San Diego County. There has also been a lot of what appear to be conflicting messages coming from Rainbow MWD and from some media sources. I fully understand the confusion – this has been an extraordinary period for local water agencies. We have never had the State step in to enforce certain mandates in this way. This Q&A sheet may not answer all of your questions – please feel free to contact me at tkennedy@rainbowmwd.com if you have additional questions.



Q: I read in the papers that there is a mandatory residential cutback requirement but RMWD says that there is no residential allocation – how can this be?

A: The San Diego County Water Authority (SDCWA) has 100% supply availability for all residential, commercial, and full price agricultural customers. There are no cutback allocations required of these customer groups from SDCWA. There is a 15% cutback allocation for Transitional Special Agricultural Water Rate (TSAWR) agricultural customers from SDCWA. These customers agreed to cut back in exchange for lower cost water during non-drought periods.

The confusion comes from the imposition of the mandated cutbacks from the State and how these are described in the media. On May 5th, the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) adopted regulations that have two main components. The first component is water use restrictions on individuals. Contrary to what the media has reported, the SWRCB regulations do not put any specific cutback requirements on individuals. The SWRCB regulations mandate that certain actions be prohibited, such as hosing down your driveway, or letting excessive irrigation water run off your property. These mandates are already part of RMWD's current drought ordinance and will be updated at the June Board Meeting.

The second part of the SWRCB regulations is to mandate that water suppliers reduce their total residential potable water production by a specified percentage. For RMWD, the cutback was initially 36% but we have applied for a reduction to 32% based on a restatement of our agricultural consumption. RMWD will need to report to the SWRCB our actual water production for residential use with a target of a 32% reduction. There is no monetary penalty for failing to reach the reduction percentage but the SWRCB could decide to mandate additional conservation measures if we fail to meet the standard. We need your help to meet this standard.

Each water agency can determine how they want to go about meeting the mandatory cutback requirements and some agencies may place allocations on residential customers. The RMWD Board has thus far decided against any non-TSAWR allocations because we have adequate supply. The simple fact is that RMWD is budgeting to sell only 18,000 AF in FY16, but SDCWA has guaranteed a supply of 21,500 AF.



Q: How do I comply with the State mandated cutbacks?

A: There is no simple answer to this question, but the reality is that the State cutback mandates do not apply to individuals, but to water agencies. They also only apply to our residential customers, not our agricultural customers. Agricultural customers use nearly 80% of the water in RMWD, so most of our water use is not subject to the State cutbacks. RMWD has no specific allocation program other than for our TSAWR customers.

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With that said, RMWD still needs to comply with the state's mandate as a whole. We are asking all of our customers to conserve where you can and eliminate water waste. TSAWR customers must make their cuts or face significant penalties (up to 2X the normal price of water). For our full price agricultural, commercial, and domestic customers, we ask that you adhere to the water use restrictions in our drought ordinance. There are a number of rules, but the simple thing to keep in mind is not to waste water. By far and away the most water is used outside your house, so make sure your sprinklers are working well and not over-spraying. A key thing to remember is that your soil can only take up a small amount of water with each watering cycle, so more frequent shorter irrigation cycles can deliver more water to your plants while saving lots that would have run off.

Many people are considering changes to their ornamental landscape such as turf removal. There are rebate programs for this through the Metropolitan Water District. In some cases, removing turf can save on water but it might not save water in all cases. Specifically, if you rip out your lawn and plant a low water consumption landscape this summer, you will likely use more water establishing the new plants than you would on efficient turf watering. For this reason, most experts recommend waiting until the fall to commence such projects as new plants will be established easier in the cooler weather.

Can we reach the numerical targets mandated by the State? A 32% cutback across the board would be devastating to our agricultural economy, but under the State mandate we only need to cut 32% off of our residential portion which amounts to about 1300 AF or about 6% of our total production. Working together with both our agricultural and domestic customers we should be able to meet this standard but everyone needs to do their part to eliminate water waste. The SWRCB has indicated that they will allow for maximum flexibility on how water agencies meet the standard.

Q: How are allocations for TSAWR customers calculated?

A: The base period for TSAWR allocations is FY 13-14 (July 1, 2013- June 30, 2014). TSAWR customers will receive an allocation that equals 85% of their monthly use for each corresponding month in FY15-16. Customers will be allowed to smooth their allocations to handle weather or operational changes between the two time periods and can group multiple accounts together as well. Forms for these actions are being sent to TSAWR customers in June.

Q: I am a TSAWR customer but was not using much RMWD water during the base period because my well was my main supply but now my well dried up – how can I increase my allocation?

A: There are a number of reasons that customers in the TSAWR program may have had low consumption during the base period used for allocations. Some were replanting groves, some were on wells. Some bought properties that were empty after the Great Recession and are now being revitalized. The short, and unfortunate answer is that the total number of TSAWR units allocated to RMWD is set by SDCWA, so we cannot simply add units without paying the fines from SDCWA.

The Board of Directors will include a smoothing program for TSAWR customers so that they can spread units around within the calendar year. Using this system, customers can re-arrange their allocations to increase their allocation during warm months and reduce it during our normally wet months. For instance, December 2013 and January 2014 were very dry months for the Fallbrook area with less than .7 inches of rain total for two of the wettest months of the year. It is likely that many people used more water in these months than most years, so they will have more allocation than average. Some of these units could be moved up in time to help offset summer demands.

Q: I saw that watering days are limited to twice per week. That won't work for me!

A: On June 23, 2015, the RMWD Board will adopt a new drought ordinance. Part of this ordinance will include a request for customers to limit their watering to two days per week in compliance with recommendations made by SDCWA. However, we are well aware that watering two days per week may result in excessive zone run times for many customers and potentially lead to more water waste rather than any water savings. For this reason, the drought ordinance will allow customers to remain on their current three day per week watering schedule so long as they take steps to reduce their total watering by an equivalent amount. For instance, watering a zone twice per week for 10 minutes could be substituted by three days per week for 6 ½ minutes each. The real goal is to use only the amount of water that is absolutely necessary to maintain plant health and eliminate all other waste. If water is running off of the intended irrigation area when your sprinklers are on, you are wasting water.

Q: How will RMWD be enforcing the drought ordinance?

A: RMWD will be strictly enforcing rules against water waste. All RMWD staff are being trained in drought ordinance enforcement. While we will not have any full time "drought cops" at this time, we do have dozens of employees out in the field every day and each will be looking for water waste during the course of their duties. We will also be working with the rest of the region to coordinate customer reports of water waste and following up with every report. Each vehicle will have special door hangers where we will notify customers if we find potential violations of the drought ordinance on their property. Records will be kept of locations where warnings are issued and subsequent violations can result in fines in accordance with the terms of the drought ordinance. Repeat violators of water waste regulations may face restrictions in their water supply at the meter.

Q: If we have supply available, then why should I cut back? I have been cutting back for years!

A: The short answer is that we may need that water next year. Every drop that is not used in San Diego County will be put into local storage here in the County. SDCWA expects to put up to 100,000 Acre Feet of water into storage this fiscal year – an amazing feat in the face of a big drought. This is the byproduct of investments that you – the ratepayer – have made in water reliability. We have new storage reservoirs here in the County that will help us prepare in case we have another dry winter. The experts predicted an El Nino last year but it never came, so while we can hope for an El Nino this year, hope is not a water supply plan that we can count on.