

# A drop in the bucket

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has made official what California's dry hills and low reservoir levels have already made clear: The state is in a drought, and we have to start changing our ways.

The very same day as the governor's announcement, which will set in motion water-conservation rules, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power adopted a plan, which goes to the City Council for approval, to enforce water conservation by way of fat fines for water-wasters - an approach that hasn't been implemented since the dry years of the 1990s.

And with good reason. Fines and a tiny team of water police cruising Los Angeles (consuming that other precious liquid: gasoline) alone aren't going to create the kind of conservation the city or state needs as it heads into a dry future where everyone is competing for scarcer resources. That's just a drop in the bucket compared to the strains on water supplies that experts predict for the entire southwest in future decades.

To be sure, the fines will be an incentive - \$300 for repeated offense isn't a slap on the wrist - for people not to waste water, at least not in plain sight. But most residential water-wasting goes on out of sight: running toilets, leaky faucets, broken pipes, multiday showers, old washing machines and a general failure to use water wisely. Not even water police willing to peek into windows are likely to stop that.

Harassing excessive lawn-waterers is one way to curb excessive water use, but what would be more effective is to set clear - and reasonable - household usage limits, with clear penalties for going above them.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power knows how much water each house it serves uses, thanks to meters, and can easily set up a rate structure that allows for moderate water use. Customers who exceed these reasonable limits, either through personal decisions or because of poor plumbing, would get slapped with rates high enough to command their attention - and, presumably, spur corrective action.

This does not have to be a difficult proposition. The DWP already tiers its water rates so that people in so-called hot zones such as parts of the San Fernando Valley are not penalized for using more water during summer months. The utility found that rate structure so effective that it's used a similar formula to set electricity rates designed to punish those who consume more than their reasonable share of energy.

But why stop there? In these tough economic times, everyone could use a financial break. If the DWP wants to start creating a city of water-savers, why not offer a very real carrot? Why not a rebate for people who use significantly less water?

The city also needs to look at its own policies of growth, which have contributed to the demand for water.

**For years, Los Angeles city officials have been stuck on the road of densification-at-any-cost, paying little mind to the effects on the region's limited water supply. If the city can fine residents for engaging in water-wasting activities, then City Hall should be subject to similar penalties. How about fining City Council members every time they approve a density-bonus development that allows developers the right to build more housing units than zoning currently allows?**

That kind of fine might have a greater impact on the future of the city's water usage than a few fines handed out to a citizenry already feeling the pinch in its recent utility bills.