

L.A.'s water supply is falling

Villaraigosa wants rationing ordered as city faces 15 to 25 percent cut despite recent rains.

By Rick Orlov, Staff Writer

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As California enters its third year of drought, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called Monday for mandatory water rationing in Los Angeles, with higher rates for residents who fail to conserve.

Residents would be limited to watering their lawns on Mondays and Thursdays, and further restrictions could be put in place by this summer, depending on conditions.

Acknowledging the fourth straight day of rain in the city, Villaraigosa said it does not make up for the losses experienced in the state water supply and the need to conserve more water beyond the 6 percent already achieved by residents.

"We are facing a critical situation," Villaraigosa said at a news conference. "We are now seeing a situation that we haven't seen for decades. We are facing cuts in our water supply by 15 to 25 percent, and we are facing permanent cuts. With this crisis looming, we have to act."

The mayor said he expects residents will have to reduce their consumption by those amounts once a final determination on the expected water supply is made.

He said he will ask the Board of Water and Power Commissioners at its Feb. 17 meeting to approve skipping from phase one to phase three of the city's water conservation plan. The City Council also is expected to consider the proposal, with the full plan expected to take effect within the next two months.

Under phase three, residents will have to abide by restrictions that have been in place since last August - such as limits on washing cars, hosing down sidewalks and serving water in restaurants - as well as limit the watering of landscapes to Mondays and Thursdays before 9 a.m. and after 4 p.m.

In addition, Villaraigosa is seeking to double the size of the city's 15-member Drought Buster force. The group has issued more than 1,400 warning citations to residents not complying with the laws. At the last estimate, 12 people were fined for violations after failing to heed the warnings.

"I felt it was important to go directly to phase three to show the seriousness of the situation," Villaraigosa said. "This is the most progressive way to address this problem. It isn't a sledgehammer, it is a targeted approach."

The DWP also will be asked to develop a new tiered system of water rates to punish those who fail to conserve water.

"The idea here isn't to increase revenue, but to encourage conservation," DWP General Manager David Nahai said.

"What we want to do is encourage people to save water," Villaraigosa said. "If they are conserving, their bills will not go up and they might even see a reduction."

Nahai said the new rates will be based on higher costs the city will face from the Metropolitan Water District, which has warned it might seek as much as a 20 percent increase for the water it sells to the city. The MWD last year provided 60 percent of the Los Angeles supply.

"We are not creating a new baseline, so if people are conserving already, we will not be charging them

more," Nahai said.

The water agency that serves most of the South Bay - West Basin Municipal Water District - has spent the past year encouraging local cities to update their ordinances regulating water usage, though none seem to have taken the aggressive steps outlined in Los Angeles.

Tonight, the Rolling Hills Estates City Council will consider a plan that would allow it to adopt tiered usage restrictions for residents based on the severity of future water shortages. If the plan goes into effect, the council would consider adopting the first phase of restrictions.

That would include telling residents to restrict the hours when they can water vegetation, turn off decorative fountains, repair leaks within 72 hours and not wash down hard surfaces. Restaurants could only serve water upon request.

West Basin General Manager Richard Nagel said the goal is to get people to proactively change their habits before rationing occurs.

West Basin, which gets roughly two-thirds of its supplies from the MWD and sells it to cities and private water companies, has an allocation plan in place in the event that the MWD calls for rationing.

Nagel said water wouldn't stop flowing from the tap if the plan goes into effect, but that those who don't cut back would face higher rates to make up for it.

Villaraigosa said he will call on the MWD to make cuts in its administration before passing on water cost increases to member agencies.

MWD General Manager Jeffrey Kightlinger praised the city's efforts and said other cities will need to follow suit. The MWD also has been working to reduce expenses, cutting \$20 million from its operation this year, he said.

"We recognize these are tough economic times and we are looking to make cuts that don't affect our ability to deliver quality water," Kightlinger said.

Nahai said the DWP will have to determine the base allocation for each residence in the city and conservation targets for them to reach.

The problem with water supply has escalated within the past year, with state officials saying the amount to be supplied throughout the state would be dramatically reduced this year.

Water supply has been reduced on all fronts -- with snowpacks in the Eastern Sierra running 70 percent of normal and expected to provide half the water normally received, the mayor said. Water from the Colorado River is also about half of capacity and the State Water Project is being reduced by 85 percent.

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