

Water conservation is more than a drop in the bucket

Daily Breeze

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By A.K. Whitney

It's a typical morning. You've had your coffee, scanned the newspaper and now you're ready to turn on the shower and wait for the water to get warm. It's something you do day after day, year after year.

You don't think much of it – but maybe it's time to start. Have you ever considered the origin of the water that helps get you going each day?

Sure, as a South Bay resident, you may live right next to an ocean, but the water coming out of your shower head isn't coming from the Pacific. Nor is most of it coming from an underground aquifer. At least two-thirds is imported, coming from the Colorado River, or from the north – the San Joaquin Delta, the Owens Valley and the snow pack in the Sierras. In other words, that water has traveled a long way and cannot – and should not – be taken for granted.

“The most important factor as to why water is such a valuable commodity in greater Los Angeles is that there isn't very much of it,” said Rod Hay, geography professor and associate dean of the College of Natural and Behavioral Sciences at Cal State University, Dominguez Hills. “Climatologically, this area is a semi-arid zone bordering on being a desert. With an increase in population in the early 1900s, water became a critical factor in the

growth of Southern California. Southern California has continued to grow and so has its demand for water.”

That demand has often led to conflict, Hay said.

“The movie ‘Chinatown’ is couched in a background of water rights disputes from the early 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, including William Mulholland’s schemes to secure the water rights of Owens Valley (in the southern Sierras),” Hay said.

The huge population growth in Phoenix and Nevada has meant less water for California from the Colorado River, said Ron Wildermuth, communications manager for the West Basin Municipal Water District, which imports two-thirds of its water, relying on recycled wastewater and ground water for the rest.

The district, which was started as a private company in 1947 to address the problem of ocean water flooding fresh-water aquifers, covers a number of South Bay cities including Rancho Palos Verdes, Palos Verdes Estates, Rolling Hills, Rolling Hills Estates, Manhattan Beach, Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach and Carson. The district also supplies water to West Hollywood, Malibu and others communities.

“We have lost half our water from the Colorado,” Wildermuth said. “We used to buy the surplus, and there’s not as much surplus any more.”

Then, there are environmental concerns that affect the West Basin District’s other sources. The Delta Smelt – a small fish that lives in the Sacramento and Joaquin Bay Delta – has been put on the endangered list.

That means that whenever a school of smelt gets anywhere near the water, pumps have to be turned off, which disrupts water delivery, Wildermuth said.

On top of that, there are climate issues.

“We just ended a three-year drought,” he said. “We’ve had a normal year this year, but we’re still allocating water to make up for the drought.” This means that local aquifers are still only about half full, Wildermuth added, which is bad news should drought conditions return.

However, West Basin District officials have high hopes the South Bay can reduce its reliance on imported water.

“We want to wean ourselves,” Wildermuth said. “We want to produce 66 percent of our water locally.”

How?

“By conserving, recycling and desalination,” Wildermuth said, adding that West Basin and other water districts (due to historical vagaries, there are an astonishing number of water districts – some private, some public – in Southern California) are working on plans to take water from the Pacific and turn it from salt to fresh. West Basin’s demonstration desalination project is being done in conjunction with Sea Lab in Redondo Beach.

But desalination isn’t the only answer to our water problem. Recycling and conservation are just as crucial, and conservation is the responsibility of the public.

Ways to conserve include shorter showers, fixing leaks and turning the water off while brushing your teeth. But a lot of water gets wasted in our gardens.

“One area where residents can conserve is outside,” said Gus Meza, senior water use efficiency specialist at the West Basin district. “Plant native plants, have less turf, reduce runoff.”

The district offers water-efficient-gardening classes throughout the area, including one June 28 in Hermosa Beach. For more information, call 310-371-7222, Ext. 206, or go to www.sbesc.com.

Other agencies, such as the Department of Public Works, also offer classes in South Bay cities. For more information, call 888-253-2652 or go to <http://dpw.lacounty.gov>.

There also are a number of websites, including one for the Metropolitan Water District (www.bewaterwise.com/index.html), that offer gardening tips and products.

Want to conserve water? Try these tips from the Water Use it Wisely Campaign:

- When washing dishes by hand, don't let the water run while rinsing. Fill one sink with wash water and the other with rinse water.
- Some refrigerators, air conditioners and ice-makers are cooled with wasted flows of water. Consider upgrading with air-cooled appliances for significant water savings.
- Adjust sprinklers so only your lawn is watered and not the house, sidewalk, or street.
- Run your clothes washer and dishwasher only when they are full. You can save up to 1,000 gallons a month.
- Choose shrubs and ground-covers instead of turf for hard-to-water areas such as steep slopes and isolated strips.
- Install covers on pools and spas and check for leaks around your pumps.

- Use the garbage disposal sparingly. Compost vegetable food waste instead and save gallons every time.
- Plant in the fall when conditions are cooler and rainfall is more plentiful.
- For cold drinks, keep a pitcher of water in the refrigerator instead of running the tap. This way, every drop goes down you and not the drain.
- Monitor your water bill for unusually high use. Your bill and water meter are tools that can help you discover leaks.
- Water your lawn and garden in the morning or evening, when temperatures are cooler, to minimize evaporation.
- Wash your fruits and vegetables in a pan of water instead of running water from the tap.
- Spreading a layer of organic mulch around plants retains moisture and saves water, time and money.
- Use a broom instead of a hose to clean your driveway and sidewalk and save water every time.
- If your shower fills a 1-gallon bucket in less than 20 seconds, replace the showerhead with a water-efficient model.
- Collect the water you use for rinsing fruits and vegetables, then reuse it to water houseplants.
- If water runs off your lawn easily, split your watering time into shorter periods to allow for better absorption.
- We're more likely to notice leaks indoors, but don't forget to check outdoor faucets, sprinklers and hoses for leaks.

- If you have an automatic refilling device, check your pool periodically for leaks.
- Check the root zone of your lawn or garden for moisture before watering, using a spade or trowel. If it's moist 2 inches under the soil surface, you still have enough water.
- When buying new appliances, consider those that offer cycle and load size adjustments. They're more water and energy efficient.
- Shorten your shower by a minute or two and you'll save up to 150 gallons per month.
- Upgrade older toilets with water efficient models.
- Adjust your lawn mower to a higher setting. A taller lawn shades roots and holds soil moisture better than if it is closely clipped.
- When cleaning out fish tanks, give the nutrient-rich water to your plants.
- Use sprinklers for large areas of grass. Water small patches by hand to avoid waste.
- Put food coloring in your toilet tank. If it seeps into the toilet bowl without flushing, you have a leak. Fixing it can save up to 1,000 gallons a month.
- When running a bath, plug the tub before turning the water on, then adjust the temperature as the tub fills up.
- Walkways and patios provide space that doesn't ever need to be watered. These useful "rooms" can also add value to your property.
- Collect water from your roof to water your garden.

- Designate one glass for your drinking water each day or refill a water bottle. This will cut down on the number of glasses to wash.
- Install a rain sensor on your irrigation controller so your system won't run when it's raining.
- Don't use running water to thaw food. Defrost food in the refrigerator for water efficiency and food safety.

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