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Water conservation: A virtue, value, necessity

Viewpoint

Published: Monday, November 2, 2009 9:05 PM EST

My water utility recently increased its rates with a tiered pricing structure: if you use more, you pay more. In so doing, San Francisco joined nearly 200 municipalities across the country, including Raleigh, N.C., Tucson, Ariz., and Amarillo, Texas.

Paying more for a vital resource like water during a down economy may seem like a hardship, but I support the increase wholeheartedly because it encourages conservation, and we need to eliminate water waste.

In California, we are fighting over water. Our cities crave it. The agricultural sector demands it. And environmentalists remind us that we need to leave enough in the rivers for the critters who live there. Our current drought is worsening the problem, but the core issue is that our state uses—and wastes—too much water.

We are not alone. Thirty-six states expect water shortages by 2013, according to the Government Accountability Office.

Some think finding more water is the answer. But that's not always possible or affordable. A hunt for more water means higher taxes for new infrastructure—longer pipelines, new desalination plants, or treating sewage water to make it drinkable.

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We can start by plugging leaks in the current system—literally. U.S. cities currently lose one-fifth of their water to leaks, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

But cities use just one-seventh of U.S. water: 47 billion gallons a day. Agriculture uses the most, consuming 142 billion gallons daily, followed by power plants that use 136 billion gallons per day, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

To successfully curtail water use, everyone needs to conserve, beginning with agriculture and energy—the biggest consumers—but including municipalities and individuals as well.

In agriculture, we must revise antiquated water rights laws. For example, in California (where 50 percent of the nation's fruits, vegetables and nuts are grown) and in other western states as well, long-term landowners have a first right to highly subsidized water. If they don't "beneficially use" their allocation, they lose it—giving farmers a perverse incentive to waste water.

Also, agricultural subsidies encourage low-value, water-intensive crops. Those subsidies need to be rethought with an eye toward water conservation. More water savings would come too if agribusiness shifted a percentage of flooded crops to sprinkler and drip irrigation.

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Power plants of many stripes—coal, oil, natural gas, nuclear, biomass, and thermal—use huge amounts of water for cooling, much of which evaporates. We need to consider water consumption as well as carbon emissions when planning new plants.

At the municipal level, San Francisco just passed new ordinances to retrofit all residential and commercial properties with water-efficient plumbing fixtures upon resale. Commercial buildings must make the changes by 2017. These ordinances could save the city four million gallons daily. Los Angeles, Dallas, New York City, and Annapolis, Md., are among the cities that have water use ordinances for new buildings. Perhaps more important, we need legislation to ensure that all new developments have an adequate water supply for at least 100 years.

Individuals can play a role too. The average American uses nearly 1,200 gallons of water per day. (You can calculate your water footprint with H2O Conserve's online water calculator: www.h2oconserve.org/wc_disclaimer.php.)

To reduce your footprint, install water-saving appliances and fixtures in your home. The EPA's online WaterSense program lists water-saving low-flow toilets, washing machines, dishwashers, and other items. If everyone upgraded, we would save more than 3 trillion gallons of water and more than \$18 billion dollars per year nationally—that's \$170 per household.

In the garden, reduce lawn size and plant native plants, which can thrive on rain alone. Apply mulch to retain soil moisture. For plants that need irrigation, use a drip system, preferably supplied by rain barrels or greywater. New sensors can shut off irrigation if rain is detected.

People can also reduce their water footprint by drinking municipal water from a refillable container rather than buying bottled water. It takes about three liters of water to produce a one-liter plastic bottle.

The foods we eat also have a water footprint. Meat is the biggest water hog. It takes eight times more water to produce 500 calories of animal-based food than the same amount of plant-based food, says the International Water Management Institute. Processed foods like soda and chips are also water intensive. So eating less meat and more fresh food is not only healthy, but saves water too!

Archeologists believe that past civilizations—the Sumerians of Mesopotamia, the Maya of Central America, and the Chacoans and Hohokams of the American Southwest—collapsed partly due to water mismanagement. Conscientious water conservation could help keep us from following in their footsteps.

— Erica Gies is a freelance reporter whose work has been published by the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, Wired News, Grist, and E/The Environmental Magazine.

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