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SACRAMENTO REGION

Meters get little credit for declining water use

CONSERVATION BID, ECONOMY CALLED KEY FACTORS IN DROP

By ED FLETCHER
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As communities around the Sacramento region continue to install water meters, a number of local officials say the devices are not saving as much water as expected.

Water usage is definitely declining, but other factors - including a poor economy and years of conservation education efforts - are having as much or more effect than meters, they say.

"People are more aware of being green and using water efficiently," said Shauna Lorange, general manager of the San Juan

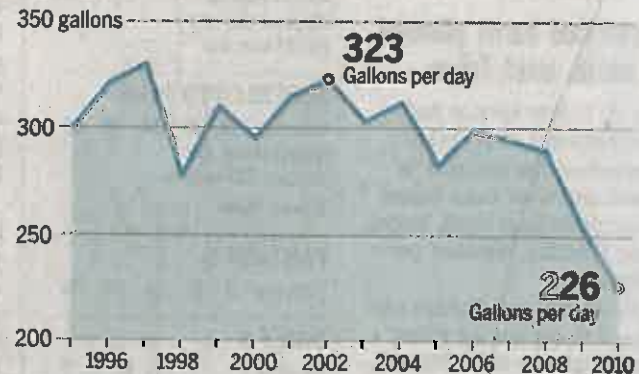
Water District. Water savings are less dramatic when people are already in conservation mode, she said.

Over the last decade, water usage by area households has dropped from about 290 gallons to 240 gallons per person per day, about 17 percent, according to the Sacramento Regional Water Authority, an umbrella agency of water districts from West Sacramento to El Dorado and Placer counties.

In Roseville - which just this week completed a 10-year, \$12 million project to retrofit 16,000 homes with meters - usage has

ROSEVILLE WATER USE

Per capita water use in the city has declined about 30 percent since 2002. Annual average gallons used per person each day:



Source: City of Roseville

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dropped steadily since 2006, according to city data.

But city officials said their comparisons show that households don't change how much water they use once the meters are installed.

"It does not appear that the fact services are metered is resulting in lower water use," wrote Ed Kris, the city's water utility manager.

The San Juan district,
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which serves Granite Bay and a portion of eastern Sacramento County, went metered in 2005. Although there was an immediate drop in water usage, consumption was right back where it had been within a year, Lorange said.

"We did see a drop, but it went back up again," she said.

Usage is down again this year, but Lorange said that's likely the result of the wet spring and cool summer.

The effect of meters in the city of Sacramento, where less than half the households are metered, is unclear. City officials have not analyzed whether behavior changed once meters were installed.

The city has 60,000 meters in place and is working on a 2025 deadline to install meters on 75,000 homes built before the devices were required on new homes.

"Overall, the amount of water we (use) has been down in the last several years," said city spokeswoman Jessica Hess. "Meters have likely played some role in that."

But overall, there's no sign

of the 20 percent water savings promised by several studies, including one cited as lawmakers passed the legislation that mandated the Sacramento region's metering program. Advocates said putting usage figures on water bills would prompt homeowners to fix water-costly leaks and to monitor long-term usage.

John Woodling, who has a broad view of the issue through his role as head of the regional water authority, estimates that local meter installations have reduced consumption 8 percent to 10 percent.

"Meters themselves encourage people to reduce their water usage, but it's really the education," Woodling said.

In the wake of a series of prolonged droughts, water districts throughout the state have been deluging users with conservation messages for years.

Officials said households

have responded, incorporating odd-even watering days and optimal watering times into their routine maintenance schedules. Programs encouraging water-efficient landscaping and low-flow toilets and showers are working, Lorange said.

Despite budget tightening, Roseville found money to keep its "Cash for Grass" program, which pays residents to take out grass and install water-efficient landscaping, and its "Water-Wise House Calls" program, which provides water-usage audits and conservation advice.

Another reason meters may not be bringing the expected savings is the relatively low cost of local water. Even if rates go up under metering, unless they hit the touch-point, customer behavior does not change, according to a study cited by Chris Brown of the California Urban Water Con-

servation Council.

A 2009 statewide survey prepared for the American Water Works Association found that Roseville customers' average monthly water bill was \$21.79, compared to \$60.24 for the average Central Coast customer. The average residential customer in Roseville now pays \$28.22 a month, the city said.

For Woodling, the bottom line is that millions of dollars spent installing meters has not, at least so far, decreased water usage enough to be cost-effective.

"In dollars and cents terms, the dollars we save don't justify the expense of the meters," he said.

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