

Cut water use by half

Easley: Cut water use by half
News & Observer, The (Raleigh, NC)
News A1
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Published: October 23, 2007

Gov. Mike Easley's call Monday for North Carolinians to slash water consumption in half by Halloween raises the prospect of people having to choose among soiled clothes, dirty hair and flushed toilets.

Easley acknowledged the state's deepening drought is taking officials and residents into uncharted and unpleasant territory.

"Whenever you use water, cut the amount by half, whether it is taking a shower or washing the dishes," Easley said. "We all need to know whether this will be extremely difficult or easily doable."

Few water managers described Easley's request as easily doable. Having already slashed usage by about 20 percent by eliminating most outdoor watering, the next step is to head indoors where water use often isn't considered optional.

That means three-minute showers, limited washing of clothes and dishes, and strategic toilet flushing. Other possibilities: turning off the tap while shaving and brushing teeth, and collecting water in a bucket from your shower to use elsewhere.

Easley's latest request that residents be ever-stingier with water caused some to wonder why he hasn't declared statewide mandatory restrictions. Water managers say the easy conservation savings have already been made.

"If he came to us and said he wanted another 20 percent from our demand, that would be a real challenge for us," said Ed Buchan, a water-conservation specialist for Raleigh Public Utilities.

Easley's announcement came a week after the governor called on towns and cities to adopt stricter rules in their communities. Easley said the idea behind this latest exercise, which he dubbed "Operation Halve-It," is to figure out how much water can be saved if residents use only what they absolutely need.

"We are not at the point where we have to go in half statewide, but we do have to know how to get there," Easley said.

While some find Easley's plea for a Halloween conservation push unrealistic, others say the governor is setting the right tone for a drought that may stretch into next summer. It's just that the governor's time frame may be far too short, they say.

'For the long haul'

"People shouldn't be thinking about conserving water between now and Halloween -- they need to be thinking about saving water for the long haul," said Jeff Orrock, warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service's Raleigh office. "I think the message to conserve and start preparing for next summer is the

right way to go."

Orrock and other forecasters are worried about long-range predictions of a drier-than-normal winter for North Carolina and much of the Southeast. That means rains that normally replenish reservoirs and ground water supplies won't be fully restored in time for next summer's hot, dry stretches.

Easley reiterated Monday that he would use his power to declare emergency water restrictions only if the drought caused a threat to life or property. Such a step can be avoided if local officials and residents respond to his call to conserve, he said.

To track water use across the state, Easley has asked public water systems to record daily use and send that data to his office weekly.

"If we do not get there by Halloween, of course, we have to try again and try new methods," Easley said.

Some residents and officials have questioned whether Easley and managers of large water systems are doing enough.

Frank Drake, a member of the Wake Forest Board of Commissioners, said the governor's office could do more to pressure municipalities into conservation.

"I've got to believe there is a force of persuasion that has gone unexploited," Drake said. "I'm disappointed, and I'm wondering what they know about the future rainfall that I don't."

Just nine water systems have adopted mandatory water restrictions since Easley called on cities and towns to set stricter measures last week. Of the 599 water systems tracked by state officials, 120 are under mandatory restrictions, but that includes most of the state's major cities, including Raleigh, Durham and Charlotte.

Dean Naujoks, the Upper Neuse riverkeeper, the Triangle-area watchdog for the Neuse River Foundation conservation group, said people would be amazed at the amount of water they can save by installing low-flush toilets and water-conserving shower heads. Naujoks said there's also use for low-tech solutions.

"Put a bottle of water in your toilet if you have an older toilet to minimize the amount being flushed," he said.

(Staff writers Sam LaGrone and Jim Nesbitt contributed to this report.)

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