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EDITORIAL

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The Four Stages of Drought

Despite above average rainfall in April and heavy rains to kick off May, the North Texas Municipal Water District (NTMWD) has asked member and customer cities, including Wylie, Sachse, Murphy, and special utility districts, to enact Stage 1 of the Water Conservation and Drought Contingency and Emergency Response Plan.

So why the concern about water when the ground is soggy, the lakes are close to full and we still have the typically rainy month of May ...oh...and what are drought stages anyway?

In August 2009, The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department discovered invasive zebra mussels in Sister Grove Creek, a tributary of the East Fork of the Trinity River and used by the NTMWD to transfer water from Lake Texoma. As a result, NTMWD voluntarily ceased pumping raw water supplies from Lake Texoma and has not resumed pumping. The infestation of zebra mussels in Lake Texoma has resulted in a loss of 22.5% of the NTMWD's total raw water supply and at this time, NTMWD does not have a firm date for the resumption of pumping from Lake Texoma.

“Although zebra mussels are not harmful to humans and do not contaminate the water supply, they do attach to water facilities and pipes that pump water causing increased operating and maintenance costs,” said Jim Parks, NTMWD Executive Director. “Since Lake Texoma represents a quarter of our water supply, we are working with state and federal agencies to minimize zebra mussels from being transferred from Lake Texoma into the Trinity River basin and ultimately southward to the Gulf of Mexico.”

The decrease in water supply prompted the NTMWD to enact Stage 1 for the more than 1.5 million people in 60 cities and special utility districts served by the NTMWD.

The Drought Contingency Plan consists of four stages with the purpose of conserving available water supply in times of drought and emergency; maintaining supplies for domestic water use, sanitation and fire protection; protecting and preserving public health; minimizing adverse impacts of water supply shortages; and minimizing adverse impacts of emergency water supply conditions. Stages of the Drought Contingency Plan are triggered through a detailed set of criteria including lake levels, demand, contamination of water supply, and infrastructure failure effecting delivery. Local public officials enact drought emergency stages at the request of the NTMWD and may tailor the Drought Contingency Plan according to the needs and circumstances of the city.

Stage 1

Stage 1 is intended to raise public awareness of potential drought or water emergency problems and

requests voluntary reduction in water use by public and wholesale customers. Cities are also asked to intensify leak detection and repair efforts. The goal for water use reduction under Stage 1 is a two percent reduction in the amount of water produced by NTMWD.

Stage 2

A five percent reduction in the amount of water produced by NTMWD is the goal for water use reduction under Stage 2. In addition to Stage 1 voluntary measures, mandatory requirements include limits on landscape watering to two days per week; time of day watering restrictions; a halt on non-essential city government water use; and the prohibition of plantings of cool season grasses.

Stage 3

The Stage 3 water reduction goal is at least ten percent. Stage 1 and Stage 2 restrictions remain in place with additional prohibitions including hosing paved areas, building or windows; operation of ornamental fountains; refilling of swimming pools except to replace normal water loss. Stage 3 limits landscape watering to once every seven days and cities may initiate a rate surcharge for water use over a predetermined amount.

Stage 4

When a drought reaches Stage 4 the goal for water reduction is “whatever it takes”. Additional prohibitions include the irrigation of new landscaping; washing of vehicles; watering of commercial and residential landscape (except foundations and trees); the permitting of new, private pools; and the initiation of a rate surcharge over normal rates.

Please remember the Drought Contingency Plan was developed by the NTMWD as a guide to help member and customer cities develop a plan of action in the event of a drought or other water emergency. Check your city or special utility district website for specific information on drought stages and conservation plans.

Many member and customer cities have also adopted an ongoing Water Conservation Plan according to recommendations by the NTMWD, including the following measures (check your city’s website for specific details):

- Time of day restrictions on lawn irrigation.
- Prohibition of watering of impervious surfaces.
- Prohibition of outdoor watering during precipitation or freeze events.
- Lawn and landscape irrigation limited to twice per week.
- Prohibition of the use of treated water to fill or refill residential, amenity and any other natural or manmade ponds. A pond is considered to be a still body of water with a surface area of 500 square feet or more.
- The use of rain and freeze sensors and/or ET or Smart controllers on irrigation systems.
- When washing a car at home use a hose with a shut-off nozzle.
- Prohibition of watering areas that have been overseeded with cool season grasses such as rye grass or other similar grasses (except for golf courses and public athletic fields).
- Installation of water-saving devices where possible such as aerating shower heads and drip irrigation lines.

For more detailed information on the Water Conservation Plan or Drought Contingency Plan, go to www.NTMWD.com; or check your city’s website for information on the implementation of the plans. Do your part to conserve this finite resource. Visit wateriq.org for tips on how to use water wisely and more efficiently.