

State needs a behavioral shift in water use

Steve Scauzillo, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 12-01-14

Not long after 9/11, going to the airport included taking off your shoes and getting body scanned.

With the advent of the smartphone, talking is giving way to texting.

As almost all of California slips into a fourth year of severe, extreme or exceptional drought, are there similar benchmark behavioral changes we can expect regarding water?

Most experts say no, not unless the 400 retail water agencies insert draconian penalties for water gluttons, or the state Legislature passes outright bans on "nonbeneficial" water uses such as lawns, fountains and swimming pools.

Without the stick, there will be no dramatic behavioral change. People obey TSA rules because it is the law.

"Are people going to become water saints, take 90-second showers and rip out their grass lawns? That's not going to happen overnight," said Jonathan Parfrey, executive director of Climate Resolve in Los Angeles and a commissioner at the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power from 2008-2013.

If there is one place where change is afoot, it is outdoors.

A quick perusal of State Water Resources Control Board rules regarding water conservation and those of most local cities and water agencies reveals the obvious: There's a bull's-eye on your lawn.

Of all water provided to cities, 70 percent to 80 percent goes to outdoor irrigation. Some experts say Southern Californians waste 1 million acre-feet of water through excessive watering of lawns each year — about half the amount of water imported into the Los Angeles region each year.

Voluntary water conservation measures in Los Angeles, for example, allow watering three days a week in summer. Some cities, such as Pasadena, have cut that to one day a week in fall and winter. The biggest target placed on green grass is from the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which is handing out \$60 million in incentives in a two-year budget mostly for what is called turf removal. MWD has received turf removal requests worth \$94 million — exceeding the budgeted amount, the agency reported last week.

The snowmelt in the Sierra was at zero percent this past summer. And reservoirs and groundwater basins — reserves for non-rainy years — are dropping rapidly, in some cases causing the ground around them to lower by dozens of feet.

In Los Angeles, a semi-arid region akin to cities along the Mediterranean Sea or in Australia, keeping a green lawn may no longer be practical.

Mitch Howard, a landscape designer with a degree from Cal Poly Pomona, says 90 percent of his business arises from homeowners who want to replace their lawns with plants native to Southern California or a Mediterranean climate because they require far less water than a carpet of Kentucky bluegrass.

"Close to 100 percent of my clients, the first question they ask is 'How can I save water,'" said Howard, who has a bumper sticker on his truck that reads: "I killed my lawn. Ask me how."

Penny Falcon, water conservation manager at Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, reported a tenfold increase in turf removal jobs from 2013 to 2014.

But parting with one's own lawn-scape unearths some deep psychological issues.

"The lawn in Southern California is a symbol of social status. That is ingrained in our public consciousness and is very difficult to undue," said Adan Ortega, a water consultant who develops conservation strategies for water districts in Southern California.

Keeping a grass lawn neat and trimmed says we are in control, Howard said. A native-plant garden is wilder, less orderly — something that can create anxiety in some suburbanites.

Watering a lawn can bring a homeowner a dose of security in a scary world, said Celeste Cantu, general manager of the Santa Ana Watershed Project Authority, a joint-powers agency working on water conservation and consisting of large water districts from Riverside, San Bernardino and Orange Counties.

The fact that surviving without water is impossible is hard-wired in our brains, she said. "Sometimes that hard wiring is expressed by wasting a lot of water," she said.

It's almost like the body gets sidetracked into bad habits over time.

To bring about a paradigm shift in water use, people need to get to know water better: where it comes from, where it goes, what it truly costs, Cantu said.

"We are in a dysfunctional relationship with water. We don't appreciate it. We take it for granted. We have to move from a dysfunctional relationship to a functional one."

To do that we must study history, she said.

The Santa Ana water authority — SAWPA — is embarking on a \$22 million campaign to transform public lawns at warehouses, factories, schools and city halls into drought-tolerant landscapes. Sure it saves water but more importantly, they are living billboards for water conservation for anyone who drives by, she said.

Better still would be if Cantu could show everyone pictures of her great-grandparents who came from Mexico and Prussia and lived in the Inland Empire not with lawns but with flowering roses, bushes and trees.

"They didn't have a water budget for nonessential things like grass. They had a relationship with water. They had a water ethic," she said.

Historian Michele Zack, who wrote several books on the history of Southern California and produced a film "Eaton's Water" on pioneers and water development in Los Angeles County foothills, said settlers from the Midwest and East Coast brought with them the British version of a public-private lawn, aka the "idealized meadow."

This concept, made popular by American-born landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, replaced the zocalos or courtyards of plants, gardens, brick and tile — with manicured meadows called lawns.

"They were outnumbered by people moving here from the Midwest and East Coast trying to show they could be civilized here," Zack said.

The only problem is that conditions on the East Coast are different than in Southern California.

Zack and Cantu see a tide change in outdoor watering but stop short of calling it a paradigm shift — that is, a universal, societal swing.

Instead, Cantu compares the turf-removal movement to a style choice, like switching from wide to skinny neckties.

Nowadays, in more affluent communities, more people want to show off their ecological hubris by replacing their lawns, said Zack, a nod to individual empowerment. Howard, whose business, MLH Design Studio is based in Whittier, has clients in Spyglass, a well-off unincorporated hillside neighborhood overlooking southeast Los Angeles County.

Cantu wouldn't object to the state water board passing a rule that bans lawns without a benefit, adhering to the law in California that says all water must be put to beneficial use. "That would be a huge leap for the board. I don't think we will see that any time soon," she said.

But through combinations of technology, a reluctance to pay higher water bills, and a green version of "Keeping up with the Joneses," lawn removals will grow in Southern California, albeit slowly. And that kind of change is already happening.

"We need to adjust our idea of what beauty is. That doesn't happen overnight," Zack said.