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Officials issue water warnings for dry holiday weekend 1

With more hot weather forecast for the holiday long weekend, Metro Vancouver is reminding residents to continue to conserve water, noting that recent rains were not enough to replenish the region's reservoirs.



JENELLE SCHNEIDER/PNG

The grass looks greener on the other side of the Lower Mainland on Wednesday in White Rock, which is not part of Metro Vancouver's water district.

The Capilano, Seymour and Coquitlam reservoirs are at an estimated 66 per cent of normal levels, which means Stage 3 water restrictions remain in effect, banning lawn-sprinkling and car-washing in every city except White Rock.

White Rock, which supplies its 20,000 residents with groundwater drawn from an underground aquifer and a series of wells, is not part of Metro Vancouver's water district.

"The real test is going to be this weekend because it's going to be hot again," said city of North Vancouver Mayor Darrell Mussatto, chairman of Metro's utilities committee.

"There's a direct correlation between temperature and water use. If we can keep it down, that would be fantastic." Environment Canada says the weather in Metro Vancouver will be sunny and hot on Friday at around 27 C, but will cool slightly to around 24 C for the remainder of the long weekend.

Metro officials have said the region would need two weeks of rain before they could downgrade water restrictions to Stage 2. In the meantime, they are hoping to keep daily water use to below 1.2 billion litres to avoid Stage 4 restrictions, which bans all watering using treated drinking water.

This does not apply to grey water collected in rain barrels, which are becoming a bigger trend across Metro as residents rush to store water for withering lawns and gardens.

"It's just recently, with the drought, people are now in panic mode to stockpile water for their gardens," Lee Valley employee Mike Pawsey said.

Municipalities are also seeing a rise in sales of city-subsidized barrels. In the city of North Vancouver, 600 rain barrels were sold during a sale in May, compared with just a dozen five years ago. In Burnaby, 20 barrels were sold in July alone — four times the norm per month, said Jim Thompson, acting superintendent of solid waste. Burnaby usually buys 60 barrels a year, 43 of which have already been sold this year.

Pater Navratil, North Vancouver's deputy manager, said some residents are warning the city not to fine them for their greener lawns. "Folks are saying, 'Don't give me a ticket when I'm using my rain barrel,'" he said.

Burnaby, meanwhile, may still have some green lawns as it is the only city with lawn sprinkling exemptions for people fighting the European chafer beetle.

White Rock is maintaining its seasonal Stage 1 restrictions, which are normal for summer when water use increases.

But White Rock Mayor Wayne Baldwin said the city is far from being an oasis in a desert of dry yellow lawns across the region. He said the lawns are just as parched as everywhere else because residents are on metered water and don't want to pay extra to keep them green.

"You can still water every other day, and at night and in the morning, but people don't water their lawns here as much in the summer because of metering," Baldwin said.

"People are pretty good about it for the most part. When you have to pay for it, you don't water your lawns."

White Rock draws its water from an aquifer, which consists of underground layers of waterbearing permeable rock, gravel or silt from which groundwater can be extracted.

The water source is privately operated by EPCOR, but the city is considering buying out the water utility for "economic reasons," Baldwin said. The city may run the water system itself or join Metro's water district, he said, although that would be fairly costly.

Bill Morrell, a spokesman for Metro Vancouver, said there had been preliminary discussions about White Rock joining Metro two years ago, but they haven't been in negotiations since.

Baldwin wouldn't say how much it would cost to buy out the water utility, but "we have struck an agreement that one way or another we will own it," with a deadline of Sept. 30.

The Metro Vancouver water district sells water to the region's municipalities, but use varies across the system, depending not just on growth but on how the cities are affected by the hot and dry conditions. No numbers were available for last year, but in May 2013, Vancouver was the largest water user, buying 109.7 billion litres, followed by Surrey with 66.7 billion litres.

Some municipalities, such as West Vancouver, which has access to Eagle Lake, and Langley Township, which is on aquifers and is connected to Metro Vancouver's system, can also use those sources to bump up their water supplies. Maple Ridge also has some groundwater capacity.

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Comment by Brian Platts:

We have no shortage of fresh water. About 70 percent of water that enters the local reservoirs flows through the dams and into the ocean. In spite of the growing population of Metro, we have not increased our water storage capacity since the Seymour dam was built over 50 years ago. Water meters are not the answer either. Not only is there the initial capital cost of installing water meters in every home, there are ongoing administration costs. With the amount of rain that falls in this region, it would be more cost effective to just pay BC Hydro for more access to the huge Coquitlam lake reservoir and increase our water storage capacity by raising the Seymour dam.