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B.C. water use target in sight

Consumption rate has fallen 18 per cent since 2009

B.C. is on pace to reduce water consumption 33 per cent by 2020, a key goal of the Water Sustainability Act that came into force on Monday.

ROY ANTAL/REGINA LEADER-POST FILES About a third of B.C. single-family homes have metered water, half the Canadian average of 72 per cent. Survey data shows there is little difference in water consumption between metered and unmetered homes.

Total water use — including residential, industrial and agricultural consumers — is down 18 per cent since 2009, from an average of 606 litres per person per day to 494, according to research led by Jordi Honey-Rosés, a professor in the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of B.C.

Residential water use is down only 12 per cent, according to survey data covering about 66 per cent of B.C. residents.

“The good news is that water use is declining,” said Honey-Rosés. “The jury is still out on whether that decrease is due to policy changes such as water metering or other factors such as urban densification, where we are packing in more people who don’t have any outdoor water use.”

Water meters are an essential tool for wise water management, allowing governments to charge consumers based on use, evaluate the impact of policy, and identify leaks, he said. But it’s not clear that meters lead to lower consumption at the prices charged to consumers in B.C.

About one-third of B.C. single-family homes have metered water, half the Canadian average of 72 per cent. Fewer than one in five multi-family dwellings are metered in B.C.

But the data from all 44 municipalities in the survey found there is little difference in water consumption between metered and unmetered homes, and little difference in price. Metered users would pay on average $418 per year for typical household consumption, while homes charged a flat rate for water pay $381.

In countries where universal metering and water pricing have been effective at curbing consumption, residents may pay several times the amount typically charged to British Columbians.

However, when consumers are offered the incentive of a lower water bill through metering — such as the voluntary metering program operated by the City of Surrey — consumption in singlefamily homes drops 30 to 40 per cent.

In high-density communities, metering reduces consumption less, by 10 to 20 per cent.

Metro Vancouver should be very cautious about any move to universal metering and water pricing, said Darrell Mussatto, mayor of the City of North Vancouver and chairman of the regional district's utilities committee.

"Metro spends $250 million on water services and less than one half of one per cent is spent on water, the rest is spent on infrastructure and debt servicing," said Mussatto. "Water meters won't change that."

Meters are the highest-cost way to effect behavioural change, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, he argued. "Is that the best use of our money?"

Metro Vancouver's water supply can remain viable even in the face of climate change for decades to come, by changing how we consume water.

"Last year, we went four months without any measurable rainfall, it was like nothing we had seen before," he said. "But people responded to Stage Three watering restrictions very positively, we met our (water consumption goal), and people made the difference."

Metro Vancouver is launching a study to determine whether a business case can be made for metering.

"There may be other ways to reduce consumption that are a lot cheaper," he said.

Mussatto and Honey-Rosés are key presenters at a drought preparedness workshop today at UBC.