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City of Santa Barbara Water

Frequently Asked Questions

Click on the categories below to see some questions that we often get about the City's water system:

Current Water Supply Status

- ***Are we still in a drought?***

No. Recent storms have filled both Gibraltar Reservoir and Lake Cachuma. This means we do not expect water supply shortages for the foreseeable future. However, water conservation is always a good idea. Water we save now will help us make it through the next dry period. For information about the City's water conservation programs: Conservation Home Page

Water Supply Update!

- ***What is the City doing to promote water conservation?***

For over 15 years, the City has maintained an aggressive water conservation program aimed at reducing the long-term demand for water. The program and staff have won awards from state and federal agencies for innovation and excellence in implementation. Results of the program are evident in a 25% reduction of per capita water use compared to 1988. Following are some of the programs the City has offered, and continues to offer, in conjunction with the Santa Barbara County Water Agency and other local water purveyors:

- ❑ Over 21,000 rebates issued for ultra low flush toilets during late 1980's & early 1990's.
- ❑ Free, high-efficiency showerheads provided to our customers (43,000+ to date).
- ❑ Free water check-ups to help check for leaks, suggest conservation measures, review irrigation schedules, and advise on use of low water using landscaping (350 to 650 check-ups performed each year).
- ❑ Recently launched a new rebate program for Commercial and Industrial customers: rebates for waterless urinals, ultra low flush toilets, and commercial clothes washers.

- Lodging Industry Conservation: provides signs to tell guests how to signal hotel staff that they wish to save water by not having towels and bed sheets changed every day.
- Individual metering required in new dwelling units to help promote conservation.
- "Weather TRAK" irrigation controller demonstration program, using irrigation scheduling based on real time weather data transmitted by radio signal to the customer's irrigation controller (106 of the top water users enrolled – savings averaging 25% annually).
- Green Gardener Certification Program, providing training in efficient use of water and other resources in landscape management (700+ gardeners certified to date)
- Large turf area audits offered.
- Landscape Design Standards for Water Conservation in place since 1989.
- Class room presentation in local elementary schools (100+ annually)
- Wide selection of water conservation literature and videos
- High School Video Contest
- Water Hot Line: 564-5460
- City and regional web sites:
  - City: City Water Conservation Home Page
  - Regional: www.sbwater.org
- Sustainable Landscape Fairs, Earth Day exhibits, Water Awareness month events

- ***How is our water supply different now compared to the major drought of the late 1980's?***

During the 1980's, the City relied on Lake Cachuma, Gibraltar Reservoir, and local groundwater pumping to meet the demand for water. The extensive cutbacks during that time highlighted the need for additional supplies. Since that time we have added recycled water, State Water, and desalination to make a more diverse and flexible water supply portfolio. In addition, sustained conservation efforts by our customers have reduced per capita water demand by about 25% compared to 1988.

- ***What is the status of the City's desalination facility?***

In 1991-92 the City, along with the Montecito and Goleta Water Districts, constructed a desalination facility with a capacity of 7,500 AFY. The project was built and operated by Ionics, Inc. under a 5-year repayment contract. At the end of the 5-year period, the City's two neighboring water districts elected not to continue in the project. The City paid the remaining costs on the contract and acquired the facility as a permanent part of its water supply. Subsequently, the City accepted an offer from a private company to purchase and relocate about half of the plant's treatment capacity. The rest of the facility (3,125 AFY of capacity) remains in place, with the exception certain components that are more expensive to maintain than to replace when the facility is needed again. The City does not expect to need the desalination facility under the assumed three-year "worst case" scenario, but it remains available if we face continuing severe drought or other catastrophic events.

Desalination

- *Is it true the City has a seawater desalination plant?*

Yes. In 1990-91, a 7,500 acre foot per year plant was constructed in response to severe drought. It has since been included in the City's long-term water supply plan.

- *Is the plant operating now?*

No. Due to ample rainfall during the years following completion, cheaper surface water has been available and it has not been necessary to run the plant. However, during future droughts the plant may be needed to avoid the hardships experienced during the drought of the late 1980's.

- *How much did the desalination plant cost to build?*

The total cost to design and construct the plant was $34 million. The Goleta and Montecito Water Districts participated in the cost of constructing the plant.

- *How does the cost of desalinated water compare to other available supplies of water?*

The annualized cost of water from the desalination plant is approximately $1,500 per acre foot of produced water, which is very close to the cost of water from the State Water Project and the City's Water Reclamation Project, two other recent additions to the City's water supply mix.

(Click here for more information on desalination.)

State Water Project

- *Is the City a participant in the State Water Project?*

Yes. The City has a “Table A” allotment of 3,000 acre feet per year in the project, which represents the City’s share of the project when full deliveries are available. The City’s allotment and the operation of the local portion of the project is managed by the Central Coast Water Authority, a joint powers agency formed to administer the construction and operation of the local State Water Project facilities.

- *Is State water available now?*

The pipeline has been completed and water is now available. For the current water year, the City is ordering full deliveries of its share of the project water. The City has also purchased an option for supplemental water to be purchased on a year to year basis during the current dry period to firm up deliveries of water through State Water Project facilities.

- *How does the cost of State water compare to other available supplies?*

When capital, operating, and maintenance costs are considered, and assuming full deliveries, the annualized cost is approximately $1,500 per acre foot of water delivered, similar to the City's costs for desalinated water and recycled wastewater. When bonds are paid off after 35 years, a portion of this cost will end.

(Click here for more information on the State Water Project.)

Rates, Water Consumption, and Budget

- *How much does it cost to run the City water system?*

The annual budget for the City Water Fund is approximately $27 million. This includes debt service to pay for construction and rehabilitation of major water facilities such as the State Water Project, the Water Reclamation Project, Gibraltar Dam, Bradbury Dam (at Lake Cachuma), Sheffield Reservoir, Cater Water Treatment Plant, and the Ortega Groundwater Treatment Plant. It also includes salaries for the sizable staff needed to treat the water and maintain the distribution system in accordance with strict water quality standards. Replacement of aging water mains is a part of the budget as well.

- *How do City rates compare to others in the state?*

In the early 1990's, City water rates were higher than most in the state, in part due to the need to discourage usage during the drought and because of several major water supply projects acquired during the past five years. However, from 1993 to 1999, average City rates were essentially flat, compared to a statewide average increase of approximately 20% during this period. Recent increases have been needed to keep pace with inflation and to fund major capital projects at the City's water facilities.

- *How high is water consumption now compared to before the last drought?*

After reducing water use by 50% during the last drought, we are now at about 86% of pre-drought demand, with approximately 10% greater population than in 1988. When taken on a per capita water use basis, usage is about 75% of what it was in 1988.

- *How much water does a typical household use every month?*

The average single family residence uses approximately 13 units of water (hundred cubic feet) per month. In multi-family residential buildings the average usage is approximately 6 units of water per month per apartment unit.

(Click here to see current City rates for water and sewer service. Click here to see information on water consumption and demand.)

Water Conservation

- *I've heard the City has wanted us to use more water since the last drought ended. Is this true?*

Since the last drought ended, we have had ample supplies for all reasonable needs. Use as much as you need, but we ask you to use it efficiently. We provide many free services that will help you improve your water efficiency.

- *Why is there a Water Conservation Program if we have enough water?*

Improving efficiency, without sacrificing convenience, is often less expensive than buying expensive new water supplies. This is why the City has included water conservation as one way of meeting our need for water in the future. In fact, you could say that we have enough water in part because we have a Conservation Program.

- *How can I be more efficient in my water use?*

We're glad you asked! Click here to go to our Water Conservation pages.

- *Do we reuse any of the water that goes down the sewer?*

Yes. The City's Water Reclamation Project recycles approximately 800 acre feet of treated wastewater each year. It is used to irrigate parks, schools, and golf courses. Click here for more information about the City's Water Reclamation Project.

(Click here for more information about water conservation.)

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Last modified: Monday, October 17, 2005

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