

## Most Efficient Water Consumers Pay the Price, Too

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Photo by Sam Hodgson

Despite heeding the call to conserve water, University City resident Dayna Hydrick's water bill is higher than it was four years ago. She's paying more money for less water.

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By **Rob Davis**

Dayna Hydrick could hardly be a better model for water conservation.

She's torn out every last blade of her University City lawn. She's laid down stone tile and planted drought-tolerant landscaping that needs less water. She's traded in inefficient toilets, bought an efficient dishwasher and washing machine. The things local leaders say to do to save water? She's done them. A decade ago, her water use was the same as a typical San Diego household. Today, it's half as much.

Each year she uses less. And yet for all the effort and expense, her water bill is about \$20 higher than it was four years ago. The cost of water has increased so much that even San Diego's most efficient users are being pinched in the pocketbook, paying more money for less water.

It's a troubling sign for future conservation goals in a region where water officials are counting on conquering the lawn love affair. Faced with the first water cutbacks since the early 1990s, those water-wise San Diegans who are answering the call to conserve still dread getting ever-higher water bills.

"I'm glad I did this," Hydrick says. She hated all the effort a green lawn required. "But why would *anyone* want to do this? Certainly there's no money reward at the end of it."

Certainly, Hydrick's bill would be even higher had she not saved water. But some water agencies have created incentives to effect conservation. The Sweetwater Authority, which supplies 186,000 people in Chula Vista and National City, charges a highly efficient home \$9.10 a month for water. In San Diego, that same home would pay \$37.39 monthly.

While Sweetwater provides incentives for its water savers — those who use less than 124 gallons a day — San Diego has hiked what they and every other resident pays in the last four years. The average San Diego home has a water bill that's \$64 a month — 67 percent higher than in 2007.

That's drawn the attention of some San Diego City Council members and utility watchdogs, who say San Diego should follow the lead of cities like Los Angeles and Irvine, which have rates that reward residents' good behavior and penalize their bad.

"We need to look at how we are going to reward San Diegans who choose to conserve water with a less expensive or lower water bill," said Councilman David Alvarez, who leads the council's natural resources committee. "And those who use way too much water should be paying a much higher premium if they're using it for things like lawns and other recreational uses."

San Diego sells water in three tiers. Use an average amount, and you pay one price for each gallon. Use more than average, and each gallon costs a bit more. Use a lot, and each gallon gets a little pricier still.

But in Los Angeles and Irvine, those tiers are steeper, and residents are told how much they should use, based on their lot sizes, the number of people in their homes and the climate. If they use more than they're allowed, their rates jump, penalizing waste. In Irvine, water in the most expensive tier (dubbed "wasteful") costs 1,000 percent more than the lowest. In Los Angeles, the highest tier costs 60 percent more. In San Diego, the highest tier costs 20 percent more.

Agencies with incentives say they've worked. The Irvine Ranch Water District, which supplies Irvine, saw a large drop in water used for irrigation in the decade after it implemented its plan. The Sweetwater Authority has seen more customers become super savers since its rates were implemented.

Mayor Jerry Sanders, who's [rejected the concept](#) before, [said in September](#) that he was willing to study a new rate structure. But six months later, no study has yet started. Alex Roth, a mayoral spokesman, said a consultant would be hired soon. "This is just the amount of time it takes," Roth said. "This is the normal timeframe for getting stuff like this done."

Though Sanders is willing to study a change, Roth said the city's current billing system offers plenty of incentives to save water. The more water you use, he said, the more you pay.

"If the system is rigged so that it doesn't give people an incentive to conserve, why are people conserving water in almost unprecedented

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