

Water budget is a logical middle ground



Permaculture in Practice

by Nate
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The City of Santa Fe's decision last month to drop to Stage Two from Stage Three on our "Drought Emergency" scale certainly partook of the absurd. What could we possibly mean by "emergency" anymore? It's been several years. Emergency? Try normalcy.

Good arguments can be made on either side of the debate.

You could say, "Since our reservoirs are about half full, we ought to allow people to save their trees and shrubs from oblivion. Especially," you could add, "since our economy depends so heavily on tourism, we need to juice up our local plant material while we have the chance, so that visitors this summer don't report back to their friends about The Dust Bowl Different."

Or, you could say, "Since our

reservoirs are about half empty and since we have yet to come up with a long-term solution to our water situation, then we better not risk creating a worse problem in the future. Especially," you could add, "since our economy depends so heavily on construction, we need to be particularly water-conscious so that our neighbors don't have to start filing for unemployment in droves."

The power of both of these arguments simply points back to the fact that our "water emergency" system has served its purpose but is now no longer useful. Calling our situation an emergency made sense when people did not understand the seriousness of our water problem, but now it seems that most people do recognize the fragility of our ecosystem.

Realizing that the word "emergency" was a good vehicle for educating people makes me believe that the city's decision to move to thrice-weekly outdoor watering instead of once per week was ultimately unwise. But, on the other hand, telling people to water once and only once a week has caused many people to drown their plant

material in an effort to be water-conscious. Why does it feel like we're all bit players in some existential play?

Unfortunately, folks, this is not a dress rehearsal. It's reality. It's our community we're talking about here. We need a new system that will continue to legislate our water use. And we need it *pronto*.

The system that the City of Santa Fe's Water Conservation Committee has come up with seems like a sensible one. The idea is that every household gets a certain amount of water to use per month based on the number of people living in the household. This way, if your priority is your garden, water your garden conservatively. If your priority is your car, carefully wash it. If your priority is your aroma, by all means, shower.

Realizing that residents were often overwatering their gardens in the cooler months and that people wash their cars and shower more often in the hotter months, the committee took the wisdom of its concept a step further. In the winter months the number of gallons allowed per month would be lowest. In the spring the number

would increase. In the summer months each household would be allowed the greatest amount of water per month. And in the fall one's use would decrease to about the same level as would be allowed in the spring.

In effect the entire community would be saving surplus water in a metaphorical water bank when need is low. When need is high, more water would be available. The system is called "water budgeting".

Although no one system will make everyone happy (wouldn't it be great if we could all use as much water as we want?), it would seem that this system, in some form or another, is the way to go. Just like a family, a business, or a government needs to stick within a financial budget in order to survive, a community with a limited supply of water should plan for its needs and act accordingly. Water budgeting seems to be the best way to do this.

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