

Drought might hit Manitouans in wallets

By Jeanne Davant

Despite this week's moisture, drought conditions still exist across the Pikes Peak region, and that could mean both water restriction and water rate adjustments for Manitou residents..

Manitou Springs City Council discussed Tuesday the city's options for encouraging citizens to use less water this summer and to keep the water department's budget balance healthy.

Because the past nine months have been very dry, water flows in local streams have been very low, said Ann Nichols, the city's water consultant.

"The typical flow last year was twice as high," Nichols told Council during a work session on the issue "We were never as low all of last year as we've been from the beginning of April."

The National Weather Service is predicting wetter conditions for the next 8-10 days, but after that, the outlook for precipitation beginning in June.

What is certain is that demand for water will jump 150 percent when hot weather arrives and people start to water their lawns and gardens. If we don't get enough moisture to boost the stream flows, "you will have a deficit, and you would have to start pulling down (Manitou) reservoir" as soon as next month, Nichols said.

Because the city is obligated through legal agreements to replace any water it releases from the reservoir, it would have to import water from Pueblo Reservoir to make up the different.

But since there is no direct way for Manitou to get that water, the city would have to ask Colorado Springs Utilities to convey the water from the reservoir through a cross-connection to CSU's water supply west of Manitou.

CSU charges Manitou \$282 per acre/foot of water to do that, and that rate could increase to almost \$600 in the near future, Nichols said.

"It's very likely that we will be asking them to convey water" this summer, she said. "What you've got to figure out is how expensive that exchange will be."

After hearing Nichols' assessment, Council members talked about how to make water conservation a priority for Manitou.

"I think we are looking at going to Level 1 restrictions by the end of this month if the flow doesn't improve," Mayor Marc Snyder says. "We might look at a combination of restrictions and rate adjustments. We don't want to be in a situation where we drastically reduce consumption, then have to drastically raise rates. We also could look at tiered rates."

Finance Director Mike Leslie said price increases during the last major drought in 2002-03 produced a 28 percent decrease in consumption, but water restrictions have tended to produce less of a decrease or no decrease in total water use.

Council asked City Administrator Jack Benson to explore tiered water rates, which would mean that higher water users would pay more, and ways to educate consumers on lowering water use.

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