

SAWS delays decision on drought rules

By Liz Teitz

STAFF WRITER

San Antonio Water System trustees delayed a decision on changes to the utility's drought rules, turning down a request from staffers to send the proposal to City Council.

SAWS wants to create new fines for watering violations, add surcharges for high water use during certain drought stages and change the hours that outdoor watering is allowed. SAWS is also proposing changes to how drought stages are triggered, along with changing the rules for drip irrigation.

Trustees on Tuesday decided not to take a vote on the changes, instead asking to schedule a special meeting or vote at their next regular meeting on June 4. The San Antonio City Council is scheduled to discuss the proposal on June 12-13.

Board secretary Eduardo Parra said he needed more time to consider the changes, saying SAWS was trying to rush the policy changes.

SAWS officials started discussing the proposed changes publicly last summer and posted drafts of the rules online at wateringrules.com, but Parra said trustees haven't had time to exhaust their questions before making a decision. Tuesday was the first time the utility presented specifics about the plan, such as surcharge amounts, during a board meeting.

"I'd like that time to finish going through every single point to be able to comfortably vote on this policy," Parra said.

A key sticking point during the board's discussion was a proposal to change the rules for drip irrigation, limiting when those systems can be run during drought conditions. Drip irrigation typically refers to a

system of pipes or tubing that allows water to drip slowly onto soil or plants.

Karen Guz, SAWS' vice president of conservation, said the utility's rules currently have a loophole that allows drip irrigation systems to be run any day, at any time, while sprinkler systems are limited to once per week during designated hours as soon as Stage 1 restrictions are in place.

Stage 1 rules are implemented when the Edwards Aquifer drops below 660 feet; the 10-day rolling average is currently 639.2 feet.

The rules have unintentionally encouraged customers to install drip irrigation instead of sprinklers, Guz said, because they know they won't be subject to the same watering limits. Drip irrigation is more efficient than spray because water isn't lost to evaporation and because it reduces overspray, but Guz said it applies water at the same rate as spray irrigation, so it doesn't make sense to exempt those systems from the SAWS rules.

"If we allow you to run drip three times a week, we're essentially allocating three times as much water to your property as someone with spray," Guz said.

Joe Silman, board president of the Stone Oak Property Owners Association, spoke during Tuesday's hearing and asked trustees to reconsider that limit. The association maintains 58 acres of islands, all equipped with drip irrigation, he said. Silman said it should instead be limited to three times per week, instead of shifting from no limits to once per week.

He said a less restrictive regulation would improve compliance, maintain the aesthetics of San Antonio and preserve property values.

Other proposed changes drew fewer questions from trustees, including a plan to replace municipal court citations for violations with fees assessed on water bills.

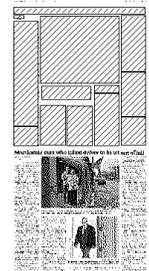
Currently, citations are assessed when customers are watering their lawns more often than allowed, or for other violations of drought rules.

The current process can take months and doesn't result in higher fines for repeat violators, Guz said. Builder D.R. Horton, for example, paid for 65 citations between May 1 and Sept. 30 and paid only \$137 for each, according to data from San Antonio Municipal Court.

Under the new rules, non-compliance charges would range from \$137 for a first violation to \$500 for a third violation for customers using less than 1 million gallons per year. About 1,200 SAWS customers use more than that amount. Their noncompliance charges would range from \$500 to \$1,250, under the current proposal. Residential customers with first-time violations could avoid the fee by taking an online education course.

The revised rules would also ensure that SAWS can penalize violators who are outside of San Antonio's city limits. The utility's service area includes most of Bexar County and parts of Medina and Atascosa counties, but under the current ordinance SAWS can't issue citations to customers outside San Antonio city limits, including cities like Olmos Park and Terrell Hills, or in areas outside the city's extraterritorial jurisdiction.

SAWS is also proposing changes to its rules for Stage 3 drought restrictions. Currently, Stage 3 limits watering to once every other week, but it can only be implemented when



SAWS determines there's a risk of supply not meeting demand.

That means SAWS has remained in Stage 2 even when the Edwards Aquifer Authority, which manages SAWS' largest water source, is in Stage 3 restrictions for its permit holders, as it is now, or Stage 4, as it was last summer.

Under the new proposal, Stage 3 would instead be automatically triggered by the same metric that the aquifer authority uses: when the J-17 index well in Bexar County falls below a 10-day average of 640 feet. At that point, instead of further restricting outdoor watering, SAWS would begin issuing surcharges to its highest-use consumers in an effort to send a financial signal to those cus-

tomers to reduce their use. Stage 4 would remain discretionary and would be considered an emergency stage, Guz said.

If approved, residential customers who use more than 20,000 gallons per month would be assessed a fee of \$10.37 per additional 1,000 gallons. That applies to only a small number of accounts, Guz said: last summer, the average single-family water bill was for under 8,000 gallons per month.

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Karen Guz, SAWS' vice president of conservation



William Luther/Staff file photo

Ricky Fernandez, right, of Superior Irrigation & Lawn, checks a sprinkler system for leaks and breaks. SAWS trustees on Tuesday delayed a decision on stricter drought watering rules.