

Aquarion Water rolling out permanent restrictions

Conservation efforts underway

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The reservoirs are full and rainfall has been ample. Yet the Aquarion Water Co., which provides water to a swath of Fairfield County towns, has rolled out permanent water conservation regulations for parts of its service footprint.



Company officials say that in the coming years, just about all of the 625,000 people in 52 cities and towns in Connecticut served by Aquarion will see similar restrictions, under which lawn-watering is limited to two days a week.

With so much water, why the big conservation push? It's simple — rainfall isn't as reliable in recent years and there have been too many summers of late in which the water company has seen reservoir levels drop to uncomfortable levels.

Combine that with the fact that there are many more acres of grass being irrigated now, and you have all the ingredients for a water emergency, officials say.

“In 2016, we were down to a 45-day supply in Greenwich and Stamford,” said company spokesman Peter Fazekas. “And instead of getting a steady allotment of rain, we'll get a lot on one day, followed by weeks with no rain at all.”

Too many lawns:

For now, the twice-a-week restrictions are in place for Darien, Greenwich, New Canaan, Newtown, Westport and Stamford. Even-numbered homes are allowed outdoor water use on Sundays and Wednesdays, odd numbered homes on Saturdays and Tuesdays. And watering is only allowed between midnight and 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. to midnight.

In other words, if you live in those communities, you shouldn't be watering at all between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., and there's no watering allowed on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays.

As for why these towns were singled out, officials say these communities have a lot of lawn irrigating going on, combined with nearby reservoirs that are relatively shallow and are depleted quickly.

“The reservoirs that serve Bridgeport and its surrounding towns have a much greater capacity — the system was designed to feed all of the heavy manufacturing plants that were operating

through most of the 20th century,” said Bruce Silverstone, a company spokesman. Aquarion is working with irrigation companies to encourage the use of sophisticated “smart” watering systems — some of which even monitor the weather forecast so lawns aren’t watered when rain is imminent. These can cut water use 40 percent or more, Fazekas said.

Drought of 2016

The impetus for this policy change came from the 2016 drought, a year when rainfall amounts were several inches below normal — and a year that followed a winter when there was very little snowfall.

“We had to impose in 2016 emergency restrictions in Greenwich, Darien, New Canaan and Stamford,” Fazekas said. “No outdoor water use at all — you couldn’t even wash your car.” That summer, Aquarion officials say, it was all hands on deck. A temporary water line was installed along the Merritt Parkway right-of-way to shunt water from the Bridgeport- area reservoirs.

“If you look at those four towns, 40 percent of their annual water use is for lawns,” Fazekas said. “So during the summer months, that figure is more like 70 percent. We had to protect the supply for human consumption and fire protection.”

Rainfall improved in early 2017 and the tight restrictions were lifted. The temporary pipe was removed too.

“During that emergency, we saved about a billion gallons,” Fazekas said. “At first, compliance wasn’t where we wanted it — there were about 2,000 violators. But after they were told that they were watering when they shouldn’t, nearly all cooperated.”

Towing the water line

There is a connection between the Bridgeport region reservoirs and the ones that serve Stamford and Greenwich. It’s a 36-inch pipe that was installed in the early 1990s. That line is now being upgraded with improved pumps. This pipe will be sistered with a second 36-inch pipe in the coming years, officials say.

Getting homeowners to comply with water restrictions usually involves a friendly note to the offender.

“Usually, that’s all that’s needed,” said Darien First Selectman Jayme Stevenson. “And just about all of our people have cooperated.”

She said some towns have passed local water ordinances, which involve fines, although most towns haven’t taken that step. Greenwich, for example, can impose fines, while Darien cannot.

Still, both town and water officials say they have limited legal options if violators insist on soaking their lawns. But water companies do have the right to shut off water to flagrant violators.

“That’s not a step that we want to take, nor is it one that we have taken,” Silverstone said. Officials also would like to see conservation on the part of homeowners who use well water to conserve, too.

“Wells are a lot deeper than they used to be, and we’re all tapping into the same aquifer,” Sil-verstone said. “And a lot of people had their wells run dry in 2016 — a huge hardship.”