

Conservation needed to prevent drain on water reserves

Report warns that regional population growth could leave supply tapped out



Cindy Adams has used water-saving devices including this rain barrel outside her Lake Villa home to conserve water. (Photo for the Tribune by Andrew A. Nelles / January 28, 2010)

Is your water too cheap? Maybe if it were more expensive, you'd do more to conserve.

That's one suggestion in a new report that for first time takes a comprehensive look at water use in the 11 counties of northeastern Illinois and urges aggressive conservation to make sure there is enough to go around in coming decades.

It predicts that demand, now at 1.6 billion gallons per day, will grow more than 25 percent by 2050. The region has a population of about 8.7 million, which the report says is expected to expand nearly 39 percent in 40 years.

"Over the last several years, there's been a growing awareness that just because you turn on the faucet, it doesn't mean water's going to come out," said Bonnie Thomson Carter, a Lake County

Board member who chaired the Regional Water Supply Planning Group.

The group's report warns not to count on the seemingly bountiful source of Lake Michigan water, because that's nearly all accounted for under rules decreed by the [U.S. Supreme Court](#).

Experts can't gauge how much water lurks beneath the ground in deep and shallow aquifers, or how quickly it replenishes. So the report can't say if those supplies will ever run dry from overuse.

Some areas that depend on groundwater already have to conserve during dry spells with steps such as forbidding lawn watering on certain days.

The report encourages steps like rainwater harvesting, the use of high-efficiency toilets and washing machines and reusing for irrigation "gray" water that has been through the shower or sink.

It also calls for collaboration among communities to protect shared sources, such as river basins and underground aquifers.

It notes that the average water and sewage bill in Illinois is about \$35.50 per month, while the national average is \$39.67. The report encourages water utilities to evaluate whether the price they charge really reflects the value of water.

"Water pricing is increasingly becoming a tool for managing demand, with certain pricing options carrying more of an incentive for consumers to use water efficiently," the report says.

Studies have shown that in Illinois, increasing the cost of water by 10 percent decreases demand by 1.5 percent, according to the report.

It warns that strict regulations safeguard water from Lake Michigan — which already supplies 77 percent of the region's demand. Although several communities in western Lake County are asking to tap into the lake, the report notes that Illinois is nearing the limit that a Supreme Court decree set in 1967 for lake withdrawals.

So conservation is increasingly important for communities that rely on groundwater, or the Fox and Kankakee rivers, according to the report.

"We've got to become more efficient," said Tim Loftus, program manager at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which coordinated the study.

The report looks at water use in Boone, Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kankakee, Kendall, Lake, McHenry and Will counties.

About 9 to 10 percent of the region's water comes from deep bedrock aquifers, according to the report. Another 9 to 10 percent of residents use shallow aquifers, and 4 to 5 percent get their water from the Fox and Kankakee rivers.

The report estimates that Cook County's population will grow about 19 percent by 2050, and the demand for water by about 14 percent.

Loftus noted that outlying counties, with the most room to grow, are predicted to see demand increase the most. Kendall County, for example, is expected to see a demand grow by more than 160 percent by 2050, according to the report; Grundy County by about 97 percent; and Will County by nearly 82 percent.

Josh Ellis, a program associate at the [Metropolitan Planning Council](#) in Chicago, applauded the new report and its call for conservation. He echoed that outlying counties must be cautious about water use.

He said suggestions in the report about using "gray" water for uses such as irrigation or washing cars will go a long way.

"The problem is not always conservation," he said. "Sometimes it's the water you're using. There's no reason to wash your car with treated drinking water."

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