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Charlotte criticized for water use

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Posted: Wednesday, Oct. 22, 2008

Charlotte could save millions of dollars and billions of gallons a year by making more efficient use of its water, says a report to be released today.

The report by American Rivers, an advocacy group, says the city could save up to a third of the water it pumps each day by adjusting water rates, stopping leaks and installing water-efficient fixtures.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities questioned that finding, saying it's already taken most of the steps the report recommends. Since 2002, conservation efforts have reduced average monthly household water use by 26 percent, not counting the effect of drought restrictions.

American Rivers calls water savings a "hidden reservoir" for the Southeast that can cancel the need to build new reservoirs. Reservoirs are controversial because they disrupt the natural flow of water and ecosystems.

"We're not just talking about conservation, but about investing in water efficiency that would pay dividends for decades," said Jenny Hoffner, American Rivers' water-efficiency director.

North Carolina's reservoir-building heyday ended in the 1970s. But by late last year, in the midst of a second severe drought in a decade, a half-dozen N.C. communities were planning new impoundments.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities draws from two lakes on the Catawba River. It plans no new reservoirs, but in 2004 won authorization to double its pumping rate from Mountain Island Lake.

American Rivers said the city could make its biggest gains by:

Charging more to big water users. Charlotte-Mecklenburg has charged "conservation" prices, in which residential water rates rise in tiers according to how much water is used, since the 1990s.

Commercial customers, however, pay a flat rate. Utility conservation manager Maeneen Klein said that's common practice among municipal systems to stay competitive in economic development.

Offering incentives to replace water-wasting fixtures and appliances. Charlotte-Mecklenburg offers free conservation kits to customers who return do-it-yourself water audits

(www.charmeck.org/Departments/Utilities/WaterSmart/home.htm or 704-399-2221).

Klein said other incentives have been studied but the city doesn't want to impose new costs on customers during the economic downturn.

Stopping leaks. The utility earlier this year studied the rising amount of “unbilled” water – about 15 percent – that escapes its system without somebody paying for it. The investigation found that about 10 percent is due to leakage, a percentage deputy director Barry Gullet said is within industry standards.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg began experimenting with “reclaimed water,” or treated sewage used to irrigate golf courses and parks, in 1998, and may expand that effort.

The American Rivers report echoes, in part, two N.C. water experts who are guiding an overhaul of the state's water policies. In a memo published in July, Bill Holman of Duke University and Richard Whisnant of UNC Chapel Hill said wasting water jeopardizes the state's ability to cope with future droughts.

The two criticized North Carolina's lack of clear goals for reducing water demand or making better use of it, and called current water pricing, which sometimes gives discounts to large users, a major barrier to efficiency.



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