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Towns without water conservation plans face penalty

Jon Ostendorff

State officials are cracking down on towns that haven't filed plans for conserving water during the drought, and the penalty could be as high as \$10,000 a month.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources said Thursday that 55 North Carolina towns are out of compliance with a law passed last year that required municipal water systems to submit water shortage response plans by July 1.

Eight Western North Carolina water systems are on the state's list.

Towns that don't have their own plans must follow the state's conservation rules within 10 days of a drought.

State rules ban uses such as lawn watering. Local plans must show how water system would deal with a drought.

"The purpose is to have measures in place that will protect the water supply in times of serious drought," Tom Reeder, director of the N.C. Division of Water Resources, said in a written statement. "If each water system takes steps to conserve, we can reduce the risk of a water shortage emergency."

Officials in three WNC towns said today that they had not yet received the state letter with instructions to file conservation plans.

The problem may come down to a paperwork mistake. At least two WNC towns — Robbinsville and Marshall — have already implemented mandatory water conservation measures.

Environment department spokesman Jamie Kritzer said some of the systems have submitted water-shortage plans but haven't updated them as required.

The WNC region is the driest in North Carolina. Lake and river levels are dropping at potentially dangerous rates.

Springs that feed homes across the region have gone dry, and town officials last week in two counties held emergency meetings about conservation.

State officials are fast-tracking Marshall's requests for permits to drill wells and lay pipe, Gov. Mike Easley announced Thursday. One of Marshall's three wells either went dry or had a pump malfunction.

The environment department is expediting permits and helping the town find money to drill new wells and build a new water supply tank.

Easley's office said the town's mandatory water conservation rules have led to a 14 percent drop in water use.

Neil Carpenter, district manager for the Maggie Valley Sanitary District, said his office has a conservation plan in place, but it wasn't in the right format. He said the state wants drought-specific plan.

"We are transferring the date over into the format they are looking for," he said.

The district gets its water from Campbell Creek and Jonathan Creek. It serves 3,600 customers, including the town of Maggie Valley. It is under voluntary water restrictions.

Carpenter said there are no current plans for mandatory restrictions, yet.

"We are holding OK," he said. "But we just don't have that crystal ball to look into. We don't know what tomorrow holds."

On the list

WNC towns and water systems on state's list:

- n Appalachian State University.
 - n Connestee Falls.
 - n Hot Springs.
 - n Maggie Valley Sanitary District.
 - n Marshall.
 - n Robbinsville.
 - n Rosman.
 - n Whittier Sanitary District.
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