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## High demand for too little water

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Slideshow



Craig and Hilda Horsman tidy up a flower bed in front of their southern Union County home. DIEDRA LAIRD – [dlaird@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:dlaird@charlotteobserver.com)

### More Information

- [New water schedule](#)

Union County recently sent notices by mail listing each customer's day for outdoor watering.

The days are designated by subdivision, or by billing cycle and bill due date. To see your watering day, visit [www.co.union.nc.us/Portals/0/PublicWorks/Documents/WaterShortage/irrig-sched.pdf](http://www.co.union.nc.us/Portals/0/PublicWorks/Documents/WaterShortage/irrig-sched.pdf).

Union County water customers have struggled under outdoor watering restrictions for more than a year – and there may be no end in sight, no matter the weather, officials say.

Too little water has ruined some homeowners' yards. County residents are selecting plants and landscapes that require less water.

Meantime, county officials are trying to find an orderly way to deal with demand, including tapping into new sources of water for existing customers and developing a policy to allocate water for future homes and businesses.

Assistant County Manager Matthew Delk, acting head of the county public works department, said “it's very safe to say” that water restrictions will be enforced indefinitely for the county's 39,000 existing customers.

While dry conditions remain part of the equation, “right now growth is the bigger factor because the capacity of our existing plants has not kept up with demand,” Delk said.

Commissioner Lanny Openshaw, a vocal critic of unrestrained growth, was more blunt.

“The drought was a convenient excuse (for water restrictions),” he said. “The way we were growing was unsustainable.”

Commissioner Allan Baucom agreed that unplanned growth is at the heart of the problem. But he said: “We're adamant to put a policy in place to make certain that we have an adequate water supply to meet the needs of the people.”

### **Taps turned with gusto**

Efforts to expand the county's water supply are still several years – and hundreds of millions of dollars – away. Even a temporary fix, such as a plan to buy water from Lancaster County, S.C., is still as many as three years away.

Until then, the county won't be able to meet demand without curbs on outdoor watering, which engineers say is the prime culprit behind demand spikes.

When they can, Union County customers turn their taps with more gusto than their counterparts on water systems of similar size, including Charlotte, a recent study shows.

Peak daily use in Union regularly exceeds the county's average use by a wider margin than in Charlotte, Hickory and Gastonia, according to figures presented by the consultant, Charlotte-based HDR Engineering Inc. of the Carolinas.

Between October 2007 and April 2008, cooler, wetter weather and mandatory water restrictions eased the strain on the county's 18-million-gallon daily capacity for most of Union County. But since the county loosened restrictions in April to allow weekend watering, peak water use again has sometimes exceeded capacity.

“I think if it's because they had a major water line break, I could understand that,” said Bob Midgette, whose Division of Environmental Health office in Raleigh enforces rules for public water supplies. “But if it's because people are watering their grass or whatever, it'd be very

unusual for daily demand” to top capacity.

### **Landscaping saves water**

County commissioners approved the latest outdoor watering schedule Aug. 11.

Instead of customers watering only on Saturdays or Sundays, they now water on designated weekdays. The goal is to reduce spikes in demand, which county officials attribute to thirsty lawns like one owned by Troy Harris of Indian Trail.

Since last summer, Harris, a business consultant, has seen his lawn wither under water restrictions, including \$5,500 in sod and landscaping. He says indefinite restrictions will hurt the county's quality of life.

“They seriously imply (that) watering your lawn is a luxury ...” Harris said. “But drive around any community that hasn't watered their lawns in six months. Do you want to live in that community?”

Meanwhile, Hilda and Craig Horsman had the yard at their south Union County home landscaped this spring to conserve water. They took the steps even though they are customers of the City of Monroe's water system. They aren't currently under watering rules, though Monroe restricted water use last fall.

The couple reduced their lawn size and added flower beds, shrubs and vegetable plants.

“The good Lord does the yard. The vegetables and shrubs are all done with soaker hoses,” said Craig Horsman, a retired associate school superintendent. The Horsmans water flowers by hand.

They're among a growing number of Union homeowners taking similar steps. Golden Leaf Nursery of Monroe has been getting more calls for landscaping to conserve water.

“We've been booked solid since the spring,” co-owner Marilyn Eudy said.

### **New policy developed**

Besides providing water for current customers, county officials are writing a water allocation policy for future residents and businesses.

At an Aug. 11 meeting, staff and consultants briefed commissioners on problems the policy needs to address. A draft could be ready next month.

Like Union County's 2007 sewer allocation policy, the document is being closely watched by developers.

Delk says many developers have called wanting to know if their projects will be allowed water service.

Like the sewer policy, the water policy is expected to divide projects into tiers, with commercial and industrial plans getting preferred spots.

Delk declined to say which projects might get priority. "We'd start a feeding frenzy of telephone calls and get bit up," he said. "You're talking about a list that is extremely competitive."



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