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Higher Water Bills for Lamorinda?

By Cathy Tyson

Prior to the first big storm of the winter season the East Bay Municipal Utility District's board of directors adopted measures in response to the drought, with the potential to raise customers' bills. The utility is calling for increased customer conservation on a voluntary basis. Early this year, customers were asked to cut back 10 percent of their water usage. This suggestion was successful with all district customers combined - residential, commercial and irrigation - reducing their use by 12.6 percent compared to 2013. Now EBMUD is asking for even more voluntary conservation, requesting that customers cut back 15 percent starting on New Year's Day, Jan. 1.

Equally important, if needed, depending on Mother Nature, the utility will make a second purchase of water from the Sacramento River. "This is our third dry year in a row. Our customers' ongoing conservation before and during this drought is one reason why we have not had to ask for harsh cutbacks," said board president Andy Katz. "We do expect some more rain this winter, but possibly not enough."

Back in April, EBMUD purchased and delivered 18,600 acre feet of water from the Sacramento River. The \$8 million cost of purchasing, pumping and treating that water was absorbed by the district. At its Dec. 9 meeting the board of directors considered making a second purchase. Depending on relatively near term rainfall, if the board decides to go ahead with the purchase customers will see a 14 percent surcharge on their bills. According to Abby Figueroa, senior public information representative, EBMUD residential customers could see their bills increase by an average of \$4.30 per month, depending on their level of conservation, until drought costs are paid. "Recent storms are helping, but water supply is about more than rain. It's about the timing of storms, temperatures and how long snow stays on the ground before it melts," said general manager Alexander Coate. "We will need at least the average level of precipitation this winter and spring to be in better shape than we were this past year," he said.

Precipitation in the Mokelumne watershed was only half of normal from July, 2013 to June, 2014. EBMUD reservoirs received only one-third of their normal runoff, making it the fifth driest year on record.

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