

## **IN OUR VIEW Drop the water subsidies**

Date: Wednesday, April 27 @ 00:00:30

Topic Opinion

Water is vital to Utah. If it weren't for water, and the discipline to use it wisely, Utah's pioneers would never have been able to survive in the Great Basin.

As the second-driest state in the nation, the need to conserve water remains as important as in pioneer days, even at times when our cup runneth over and we're worried about flooding.

Yet conservation doesn't figure into the cost-of-water equation in Utah.

Despite how much you may complain about your water bill, you're still getting a 41-percent discount. In Utah, water rates cover only 59 percent of the real cost. The rest is borne through property taxes, sales taxes and other subsidies. This hides the true cost and, in some cases, shifts the burden to others. For instance, everyone in Utah County pays taxes for the Central Utah Project, yet only six cities receive water directly from it.

As a result of state and federal subsidies, Utah water rates are generally low, and cheap water doesn't encourage conservation. Surprisingly, Utah is second in the nation for residential water consumption, measured in gallons per year.

Now add rate structures that virtually encourage waste. Many cities set their base rates to include up to 10,000 gallons of water. For a family of four, that's about right for a month, but for couples or singles or people with small lawns, that's a lot of water. Blissfully unaware of the true cost, and swimming in overabundance, they may find it all too easy to run through more water than they really need.

That's bad in a place that is prone to drought and where the population is expected to double in the next 20 years. If we want to ensure there's enough water, we need to take some serious steps now.

Sprinkler restrictions and the voluntary "Slow the Flow" campaign are not sufficient. Asking people to cut back voluntarily does not result in widespread water savings because most people will think the other guy's going to do it. And odd-even sprinkler orders can be easily dodged by running sprinklers at night when nobody's looking.

But culinary water is nothing compared to what is poured into agriculture. Farms and other agribusinesses use 82 percent of the water in Utah, yet they only contribute 1 percent to the state's gross domestic product. That's a bad return on investment. And when people see farmers watering their fields at high noon, government's pleas for residential conservation ring hollow.

Overhauling rate structures to reflect the real cost of water would boost compliance -- and conservation. It's been said that the most sensitive part of the human anatomy is the pocketbook, and once you take hold of that, the rest will follow.

It's time to take the subsidy off water for everybody, including agriculture. If all users, including farmers, had to pay the real cost of the water they use, they may be more careful. Farmers may be more inclined to adopt modern, water-conserving methods for irrigating their crops. And if agricultural use were reduced by just 10 percent, the amount of water available for residential use would double. That alone would seem to justify a new public policy.

Cities would need to develop realistic water rates, of course. Instead of giving people 10,000 gallons under a flat-rate approach, the amount might be reduced to, say, 1,000 or 2,000 gallons. This would eliminate the state of blissful unconcern that is now the domain of the unmarried and the lawn-less, and it would reinforce the truth that water is a valuable commodity. Progressive rates also would encourage conservation. For example, the rate could be designed to increase as more gallons are used -- sort of like tax brackets, where rates climb with income. This would further spur agricultural water users to practice conservation, since they are the biggest users in the state.

Water is precious in a desert state. It's about time we started treating it that way as we plan for growth.

This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page A6.

This article comes from The Daily Herald (Provo, Utah)  
<http://www.harktheherald.com/>

The URL for this story is:  
<http://www.harktheherald.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=53678>