

Water Restrictions Can be Positive – An Educational Approach to a Mandate

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Abstract: *Fort Collins Utilities implemented an educational approach to engage its community to support and comply with water restrictions. This approach focused on a campaign that used steps to create participation without heavy-handed enforcement. The steps began with **awareness**, created through advertising campaigns. **Knowledge**, spells out the ordinance and who is affected, is followed by an **attitude** step that creates a mentality of “I should do my part”. Fort Collins Utilities offers programs to give customers the **skills** to achieve conservation which gets them to the final step of **participation** or complying with the water restrictions. A similar approach was used the last time Fort Collins experienced water restrictions. Since then, the community has demonstrated a 25 percent reduction in water use.*

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How do you get 140,000 people to change their long term water use habits? Start with implementing water restrictions in the spring and continue to educate your public about water conservation. An educational approach to a mandate is not new but using community-based social science concepts, and engaging staff with a foundation in environmental education, may be. Our approach was to educate our public, starting internally with utilities staff, with hands-on and varying learning-style approaches before and during water restrictions. We created a recognition program to showcase businesses and community members that exemplified the behavior change we required. We used community allies such as the school district and university to help us communicate. During the presentation, data and results will demonstrate how an educational approach is effective and long-lasting.

Fort Collins, Colorado is located 60 miles north of Denver and nestled in the Rocky Mountain foothills. This mid-sized city has been showered with awards and recognition, such 2012 accolades for “Top Downtown in the Country,” *Livability.com*- Nov 2012 and “Platinum Bicycle Friendly Community,” *League of American Bicyclists* - May 2013. Fort Collins Utilities is a municipal utility that provides water to about half of the Fort Collins residents and businesses (35,000 customers) in addition to electric, waste water and stormwater services.

Fort Collins Utilities receives raw surface water from two main sources, the Cache la Poudre River and Horsetooth Reservoir. On average, each source provides about half of the supplies used to meet Utilities’ customer water demands. Utilities were uncertain how much water would be available in 2013. The 2012 High Park fires in the Poudre Canyon limited the amount of Poudre River water available to treat due to poor water quality from rainfall over the burn area and fluctuations in the river flow. In addition, persistent drought conditions continued to impact the amount of water supply available.

These conditions lead to a decision to enforce water restrictions, starting April 1. Fort Collins Utilities used an educational approach to engage its community to comply with water restrictions. A similar approach was initiated in 2002-2003, the last time the city experienced water restrictions. Since then, water conservation efforts have demonstrated a 25 percent reduction in water use. Starting with awareness through participation, our approach is outlined below.

Awareness

Utilities worked with Colorado State University professors to create effective messages around our mass media communication campaign to make our community aware that water restrictions were in effect. The outreach materials were designed in a way that could be used beyond the need for mandatory restrictions.

Knowledge

Knowledge was built through a community outreach campaign. Businesses most affected by water restrictions and various audiences were identified. A speaker's bureau was created to reach out to all City employees, the community and each of the 10 highly impacted sectors, (1,400 total people). Additional outreach efforts were made to reach the low-income, and Hispanic population, senior citizens and schools. All of these efforts built on the existing water conservation programs.

Water restriction programs were developed to assist homeowners in their efforts to comply with the restrictions. A contractor open house was used as a forum to reach out to local landscape and irrigation contractors and explain the ordinance. Permits were available for those with hardships or large properties, benefiting a total of 171 customers at no cost to the public.

Attitude

Building awareness and a strong knowledge base allowed our community to form its attitude that "Water is important, I should do my part." We did have some customers call in with a "What are you going to do about it?" attitude. This was approached in a way that educated the caller about the drought, effects from the recent fires and the ultimate decision to restrict water use. With this attitude of valuing water, skills were made available and compliance with restrictions was easily achieved. We built an attitude to conserve water by creating a new recognition program.

Skills

Even when a citizen is aware of water restrictions, has an understanding of why we have them and shares the attitude that restricting water use is the right thing to do, he may not know what to do. This is where Fort Collins Utilities built in the skill to understand what can be done. For 13 years, the Fort Collins Utilities has administered a free sprinkler audit program for customers and neighboring water districts. The audit program educates customers on landscape water needs and general skills to maintain and operate a sprinkler system. A program analysis shows that customers that participate in a sprinkler audit average 20 percent less water on their landscapes. Programs offered during restrictions include:

- Free sprinkler audits
- Free controller assistance (programming controllers for restrictions)
- Extensive programs on xeriscaping and sprinkler workshops

Participation

Ultimately, by using these steps toward behavior change, our water restrictions campaign was successful. Our community was on board. They complied, and when they didn't – we gave them the tools to comply. We had support from all community sectors and widespread understanding for the decisions. This ultimately led to "participation" or willingness to comply with water restrictions.

Conclusion

Fort Collins Utilities chose an educational approach to enforce a mandate during a time of short term restrictions so that long term values of water are imbedded in our community. We created a positive campaign that gave the tools to the community to react and comply with water restrictions. We offered knowledge internally and externally through a speaker's bureau and an extensive advertising campaign. We identified those businesses and customers who were actively participating and making great efforts in conservation, and rewarded them. These steps led to successful acceptance of mandated water restrictions.