



Vancouverites stop flushing toilets, showering to conserve water

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VANCOUVER (CP) - Amid frantic warnings that Vancouver-area water supplies could run dry this fall, B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell said he would shower less and many citizens have stopped flushing their toilets in a smelly stab at conservation.

"There's a definite 'ick' factor, but we're not flushing toilets after every use," said Bill Morrell, a spokesman for the Greater Vancouver Regional District. As August wound down, nearing the end to British Columbia's driest summer on record, civic officials announced that if people kept sucking up as much water at the current rate - two billion litres per day - area reservoirs, now at 37 per cent of capacity, would be dry by mid-October.

Morrell said the appeals for conservation have helped, reducing consumption by 15 per cent and buying Lower Mainland residents another month of water.

"If people keep up the good work, that should be enough to tide us over until the rain comes," he said.

In the meantime, Vancouverites were getting creative.

"We put bricks in our toilet tanks at the office here," said Otto Langer, co-ordinator of marine conservation projects for the David Suzuki Foundation.

"One brick displaces about a litre of water, we use two, so in an office like ours where the toilet gets flushed about 100 times a day you're saving 200 litres of water."

Flushing is, of course, kept to a minimum at the Suzuki headquarters.

"If it's yellow, let it mellow, if it's brown, flush it down!" sang Langer.

The city hasn't quite adopted that tag line in its drive to save water but it has gotten crafty.

Drinking fountains have been turned off and water from closed swimming pools is being used to keep newly planted trees alive.

"We've got 70,000 gallons in here," said city arborist Paul Montpellier, pointing to the New Brighton Park pool. The chlorine will be burnt off by the sun before crews start using it.

That water will keep the 4,000 trees, worth \$1.2 million, hydrated and alive through to the New Year and Montpellier only expects to have to water them for another three weeks.

On the home front, Langer said he and other environmentalists are having "sailor showers."

After rinsing and collecting water in a basin, the tap is turned off for soaping and shampooing. Langer then rinses with the basin water and allows a quick splash to get rid of excess soap if necessary.

This may sound like a ridiculous practice for people living in a coastal rainforest climate, but parts of British Columbia are seeing the most severe drought conditions in 100 years.

In Vancouver, summer rainfall (June to September) so far this year has measured 36.7 millimetres, versus a 10-year average of 132.4 mm. Flow conditions in some streams across the province are only 10 to 25 per cent of normal for this time of year.

The province says its forecasts suggest the drought will stretch into late September and there may not be enough rain and snow over the winter to replenish reservoirs.

That makes conservation critically important said Water, Land and Air Protection Minister Joyce Murray.

"Some communities are doing an amazing job," she said. "The Okanagan District of Summerland has reduced consumption by 50 per

cent because of a crisis with their water levels.

"We're encouraging people to take this issue very personally and to think each time they use water how they can do it without wasting any."

The premier said he was taking the minister's advice and committed to spending less time in the shower. People will probably notice the effect it has on his appearance, he joked, but Campbell encouraged everyone to follow suit.

Municipalities have imposed stringent lawn-watering bans, as well as the use of pressure washers, and officials are pleading with residents not to wash their cars

As weather becomes less predictable, possibly as a result of climate change, Murray said it's clear the government has to do a better job at planning.

"We have begun discussions with the other ministry partners about this over the last while and there's more to be done, clearly."

The regional district, which includes Vancouver and major suburbs such as Surrey, Burnaby and Coquitlam, said it is taking another look at installing water meters in some of the 375,000 homes in the Lower Mainland that don't already have them. Residents pay a flat rate for water each year and can use as much as they want.

"We have the cheapest water in the world," said Langer.

The expense of retrofitting homes with meters or water-conserving toilets has been too much to consider in the past, but Morrell said it could be worth it. It is estimated meters would reduce consumption by up to 30 per cent.

Some municipalities require both devices to be built into all new homes.

Some household water conservation tips and benefits:

- Turning off tap when brushing teeth or shaving could save seven to 12 litres of water a minute.
- Take shorter showers and save six to 19 litres a minute.
- Install low-flow showerhead and save as much as 10 litres a minute.
- Do only full loads in washing machines and dishwashers, or do dishes by hand. Each machine load uses from 170 to 190 litres.
- Wash vegetables and fruit in a pan instead of under a running tap, which uses seven to 12 litres each minute it's running.
- Change tap washers to help stop dripping, which can waste as much as 300 litres a week.
- If local restrictions allow you to wash car, use bucket and sponge or spring-loaded nozzle on the hose. This could save 300 litres of water or more.
- Water garden using a watering can or spring-loaded nozzle to save 10 to 35 litres a minute.
- Check toilets for worn parts to see which ones need replacing, and use food colouring in the water tank to see if water is leaking into the toilet bowl.

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