

STATE WATER WOES

EBMUD drought policy meetings enough to make your mouth dry



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As board members of the East Bay Municipal Utility District discussed the five stages of drought at last week's meeting, you could almost feel the moisture being sucked out of the atmosphere.

Stages 0 and 1 are normal times; the difference is water reserve levels. Stage 2 is where we are now; voluntary cutbacks. Stage 3 means mandatory rationing. If we

get to Stage 4, it's sponge baths for everyone.

Weekend showers notwithstanding, California's lack of rainfall has been a fact of life for nearly two years, but it largely escapes conversation because faucets still run and sprinklers still sprinkle. EBMUD customers have reduced water use

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— 14.8 percent last month — but their lifestyles haven't changed noticeably.

It's not until you sit in on a meeting where water is the topic on everyone's mind that you ponder the long-range challenges of making sure we don't run out. It's what makes the business of managing a water district so counterintuitive; while most businesses succeed by increasing demand for whatever they sell, water managers seek to lessen demand for their product.

That's why part of Tuesday's meeting was spent weighing the parameters of a supersaver program that rewards customers for cutting consumption. As always, the devil was in the details.

How to qualify as a supersaver? A staff report proposed the cutoff at 50 gallons a day. ("That's pretty tight," said director Frank Mellon, who offered 100 as a more reasonable figure.) But, wait, do 100 gallons identify a super-

saver or just a consumer with low water needs?

Perhaps the designation should be based on a reduction in use. ("If we base it on a percentage of reduction," said director Katy Foulkes, "we're not recognizing those people who were already saving water before.") This was not going to be simple.

And what's the reward for supersavers? When a \$2-per-month credit was floated in a community outreach effort, the consensus preference at four meetings was nonmonetary recognition, like a bumper sticker with a congratulatory message ("I gave up bathing for this silly bumper sticker"). Of course, only 87 of EBMUD's 1.3 million customers attended the meetings. Who knows what they really want?

The last portion of Tuesday's agenda addressed penalties for excessive use. If the supersaver program was the carrot, this was the stick.

When should penalties be applied, at Stage 3 or 4? What's the excessive-use cutoff mark — 60 monthly units (1,500 gallons per day) or 45 (1,125)? Should

the penalty be \$2 for every extra unit or should it be higher?

Deciding whom to punish and reward is not as simple as it seems. Further complicating matters is the diversity of household sizes, property sizes and microclimates in a district stretching from Crockett to San Lorenzo to Blackhawk. A family in Alamo needs more water than a bachelor in Berkeley, especially during summer months.

"If we're talking about fairness," said director John Coleman, who represents Contra Costa County, "we need to break the geographic area apart. Every standard now is districtwide. That's skewed against a large chunk of my district."

Carrot-and-stick details are still to be hammered out. Rewards and penalties will be fine-tuned. One thing everyone agrees on: We need more rain.

"If we get to Stage 4, all bets are off," Coleman said.

Makes my mouth dry just thinking about it.

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