Rocky Mountain News

Flush with creativity, firms fight drought

Businesses seek to keep taps from running dry

By Catherine Tsai, Associated Press
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An Intel Corp. engineer was in an airport restroom when he noticed something he thought might help the chip maker save water at its Colorado Springs plant: waterless urinals.

Under a plea from utility officials to save water, Intel is testing three of the contraptions to see if it makes sense to install them plantwide.

"We recognized we were in a drought situation and wanted to be a good corporate citizen," spokeswoman Judy Cara said.

Saving a flush here and there may seem like a small thing, but businesses across the West have been asked to do their part in conserving water because a five-year drought has left reservoirs well below normal.

The efforts have become more urgent as water agencies from California to Colorado consider levying surcharges for ever-scant water. The bigger worry for businesses isn't the surcharges but the supply of water.

"If you can't get water, it's a much more serious problem than not getting oil," said Sung Won Sohn, chief economist for Wells Fargo & Co.

Just how much money companies are spending on conservation is not well- known, partly because items like the surcharges are relatively new. But anecdotal evidence abounds:

● Some car-wash operators reported a 10 percent to 20 percent drop in business due to drought for the first five months of the year.

"It's a double-whammy for us. We've not only lost business from people trying to save water by not washing their cars often, but then we're surcharged for that water," said Doug Christ, president of the 150-member Rocky Mountain Car Wash Association.

● Coors Brewing Co. in Golden avoided the prospect of surcharges because it has its own portfolio of water rights, some of which are a century old. The company is prepared to withstand three years of serious drought, spokeswoman Aimee Valdez said.

● Sinton Dairy Foods in Colorado Springs hopes to save $2,000 per month to $3,000 per month from measures that include installing an $8 million plant that will allow it to cut water use by 1 million gallons.

"The dollars weren't really the impetus here because water still isn't all that expensive per gallon," said Bill Keating, Sinton's vice president of operations. "It was more a matter of trying to do our part."

● Frito Lay, which installed new systems to capture and reuse water for making potato chips, and Conoco Phillips are among companies that have agreed to programs in Denver in which they can be rewarded up to $40,000 for changing processes to save water. The Southern Nevada Water Authority has been working with Las Vegas casinos and hotels on the same thing.

In the meantime, farms and ranches are dealing with dwindling crops and feed for livestock, and water-dependent tourism industries like rafting and fishing have suffered. That has led to losses at other businesses.

"In terms of nonfarm businesses, it is a severe headwind all around," Sohn said.

In Denver, drought surcharges are being phased out now that reservoirs are back to 80 percent of capacity following spring storms.

"But with a growing population and the variability of Mother Nature, these types of situations may become more frequent," said John Reed, a conservation specialist with the city's agency, Denver Water.

At Intel, officials are recycling wastewater from its system for making flash memory chips for use in its cooling towers. Cara said Intel already has cut water use 34 percent this past year for savings of 78 million gallons a year.

Then there are the urinals. They look like other urinals but have a cartridge in the base that acts as a funnel. A sealant liquid traps odors, and the reusable cartridge filters sediment before urine passes into the drain with no flush. Intel estimates each urinal could save it 20,000 gallons of water per year.